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Ralph Grasso: A West Side Oral Narrative Interview conducted by Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald May 19, 1999; [West Side Oral Narrative Project: Transcribing Discourse and Diversity (No.1: September 2, 2020)]

Ralph Grasso

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****DRAFT****

Ralph Grasso

**A West Side Oral Narrative Interview conducted by Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald
May 19, 1999**

West Side Oral Narrative Project: Transcribing Discourse and Diversity (No.1: **September 2, 2020**), edited by Michael C. Ennis-McMillan, Elijah McKee, and Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald. Department of Anthropology, Skidmore College: Saratoga Springs, NY.

Overview

Ralph Grasso (1933-) was born in Saratoga Springs to Italian immigrant parents. The conversation includes childhood memories of growing up on the West Side, playing games, serving as an altar boy, and working as a shoe shiner and assisting in his father's store on Beekman Street. He explains adult life, including playing bocce ball and card games. The conversation includes information about the origin of Grasso's Italian Ice business, and Ralph describes other community activities, including wedding receptions, making wine, caring for neighborhoods, and raising a family. He served in the Korean War. The conversation includes Dolores Grasso, Ralph's wife, and Marge Van Meter. (Interview duration: 1:12:08)

West Side Oral Narrative Project

The West Side Oral Narrative Project is voluntary, community initiative to document oral heritage of long-term residents of the West Side neighborhood of Saratoga Springs. The collection began with 62 interviews recorded from 1998-1999 that explore the experiences of working-class and immigrant residents living and working on the West Side. Interviewees reflect on daily life and community events from the 1920s's up to the 1990's, particularly focusing on African-Americans, Irish-Americans, and Italian-Americans. The West Side Narrative Project Collection is available at the Saratoga Room at the Saratoga Springs Public Library. Online: https://www.sspl.org/research/local_history/. The annotated transcripts are presented as the *West Side Oral Narrative Project: Transcribing Discourse and Diversity*, a series of documents and other digital material organized by faculty and students from the Department of Anthropology.

Reference: Grasso, Ralph. 1999. "A West Side Oral Narrative Interview conducted by Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald." *West Side Oral Narrative Project: Transcribing Discourse and Diversity in Saratoga Springs, New York* (No.1: September 2, 2020), edited by Michael C. Ennis-McMillan, Elijah McKee, and Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald. Scribner Library, Skidmore College: Saratoga Springs, NY.

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Ralph Grasso
A West Side Oral Narrative Interview conducted by Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald
May 19, 1999

MARY ANN: Today is May 19, 1999. This is Mary Ann Cardillo Fitzgerald. I am at the home of Ralph and Dolores Grasso at 10 Oak Street in Saratoga Springs, New York. Um, with me today also is Marge Van Meter, so if, um, you hear voices, um, in addition to Ralph and Mary Ann, they may possibly be Dolores or Marge.

MARY ANN: Good morning, Ralph. How are you today?

RALPH: Fine, thank you. And yourself?

MARY ANN: I'm very well, thank you. Ralph, today I would like to, um, talk to you about your experience growing up on the West Side of Saratoga. Um, we have, um, a wonderful, um, history here written up. And did you say you wrote this up?

RALPH: Yes, I did.

MARY ANN: You did a very nice job of your family history. Um, how did you get all this information?

RALPH: Well, I say I wrote it up, but I got information from my brother and possibly some from my cousin, if I can recall.

MARY ANN: And you wrote this up in 1994.

RALPH: Correct.

MARY ANN: And everyone in the family has a copy.

RALPH: Supposedly, yes I sent them a copy.

MARY ANN: And, now we have one for our archives. This is something I would like to encourage, um, other people to do because it's a great outline. It's a great jumping off point for oral history projects. Um, now, when you were growing up, what, what street were you born on in Saratoga?

RALPH: You know, I really can't remember, but I thought that I was born in the present—um, the John Agosta's house over on Oak Street. I thought that's where I was born. I'm not entirely positive, but it was in this area.

MARY ANN: But it was in this area?

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: Now, when you were a child, where are your earliest memories? Um, what street do you remember, um, living on? What house?

RALPH: I remember on Aletta Street. The house is no longer there.

MARY ANN: Oh really? What is there?

RALPH: Uh, nothing, it's just, uh, torn down by then. There used to be a sand bank right next to it. It's all leveled out now. Um, as you're going near NAPA's, before you reach NAPA's, at the, as you approach there.¹ Soon as you approach, you can go down Aletta or go down to NAPA's. Or take the left route there. Right at that point was a house. That's where we lived, and right next to it was, um, a sandbank and all that. And then there was this colored gentlemen, Mr. Manigault, that used to live right next door to that.

MARY ANN: Oh really?

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: And who were some of your other neighbors in there? Do you remember?

RALPH: Well no, I really don't. But it was a short walk down Aletta Street to my uncle's house, where I used to go quite often.

MARY ANN: Now that uncle was . . .

RALPH: Uncle Bartholomew.

MARY ANN: Uncle Bartholomew.

RALPH: Uncle Bart. He was the mason.

MARY ANN: Okay. Now, did he do, uh, work in that area, masonry work?

RALPH: He did a lot of sidewalks and stuff. Uh, what is still present is at the old K of C [Knights of Columbus] home on Lake Avenue and I think it's Marion [Place], that it's now a bed and breakfast.² Right there, they still got it. It was a, uh, like a grotto outta rocks where ya got a statue of the Blessed Mother in it. He did that.

[
MARY ANN: And that was built by Bart Grasso.

RALPH: Right, right. And he's also done others I can't really—you know, like a little bridge, and stuff like that. But most of it was sidewalks and, uh, foundations and stuff like that.

¹ NAPA auto store was located on Aletta street at the time of the interview.

² K of C refers to the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal service order founded in the 1800s as a mutual benefit society for working-class and immigrant Catholics in the United States.

MARY ANN: Because there are some houses in that area that, that do have distinctive stonework and masonry. That's why I was wondering. But this is good to know about the, um, K of C home.

RALPH: Yeah. That's . . .

MARY ANN: Did he do that for the K of C home?

RALPH: Yes.

MARY ANN: Okay. We'll be sure to get a picture of that.

RALPH: Okay. And I know he did others, but I'm not privy to it. I don't really remember. I sorta recall seein' a beautiful bridge he built. I don't really remember where now. It was for, probably another thing like the K of C home or whatever. I can remember seein' that vaguely in my mind, but I, I, I couldn't pinpoint it, I'll tell you that.

MARY ANN: Right. Now, um, what are your earliest memories of your childhood, playing or . . . anything stand out?

RALPH: Oh . . . well . . . well, my early years was, you know, just like anything else, young kids, okay? And we used to have fun. My best buddy was, uh, Richard Comfort who lived at the corner of, um, Perry and, uh, Aletta Street, there. Right—the Comforts are still there. Of course, he's not there. And, uh, where the Grattons lived next on, uh, Perry Street, there used to be a big sandbank. And I remember coming offa that sandbank—you know, snow, it was snow at that time—with my sled, which had the iron, you know, front. It wasn't all wood but a lotta metal. And, uh, I remember flying offa that thing, there, and hitting a rock below and gashing my head pretty good. And I still got the gash. It still shows that thing. And it split my head open, and, uh—the thing that saved me was one of these, uh, navy wool hats that you see. But I hadda roll it up about three—I was small—I'd rolled it up 'bout three, and it hit there first and then drove that. And I remember bleeding all over and tryin' to get home, passin' my uncle's, and he said "You wait here." He was going for iodine [*laughs*], and I musta heard that, and I kept goin'. [*others laugh*] And Mr. Manigault was the one who saw me and took me in his car to the Saratoga Hospital. I believe it was Saratoga Hospital. It hadda be Saratoga Hospital. And, uh, I remember that.

MARY ANN: Oh that's—

RALPH: He was quite a gentleman.

MARY ANN: Mm-hmm, Mr. Manigault.

RALPH: Yeah. Next to him was, uh, Palmer's Bicycle Shop. He used to fix bicycles there. So, that's, that's all gone, but that was down that whole strip.

MARY ANN: He was there for quite a while!

RALPH: Oh, long time.

MARY ANN: Mr. Palmer.

RALPH: Yes, he was. He fixed all the bikes. Yep.

MARY ANN: Now, um, did you—what school did you attend?

RALPH: I attended St. Peter's School all throughout.

MARY ANN: Oh, you did?

RALPH: Yeah. And, uh, course it's different. In those days, you walked whether there was snow or not. You walked—we walked from Beekman Street here. And, uh, we took all the, you know, shortcuts we could. And we had to go—no matter what the weather, we had to go to school. There was no rides. You walked.

MARY ANN: No, no snow days?

RALPH: Oh, no, no, no, you, you—

MARY ANN: And no school bus?

RALPH: No, no school buses.

MARY ANN: Okay. Now, the route from Beekman to St. Peter's School—what, what streets did you walk down?

RALPH: Well, I think we went down, uh . . . lemme see, it'd be Ash. There used to be the railroad tracks there. So we would cross there. And there was Ketchum Garage down on, I think it was Hamilton—not Ketchum. I'm sorry. I forget the name. Bigsbee.³

MARY ANN: Oh yeah.

RALPH: I think it was Bigsbee's. And, uh, we used to walk down that hill and then cut over to school. Or instead of going down the hill to Bigsbee's, we would go—we would just swing a right and go around the hotels that were there and the, uh, Baptist Church or some sort that was there, and just walked directly down to the school.⁴

MARY ANN: Because none of that is there anymore.

³ Bigsbee Motors was located on the southwest corner of Congress and Hamilton Streets where Wendy's is currently located.

⁴ Mount Olivet Baptist Church was located on the corner of Williams Street and South Federal Street. The New Capitol Hotel was one hotel in that area.

RALPH: None of it.

MARY ANN: So it's interesting to hear that route. You had hotels . . .

RALPH: Oh, yes, there was a . . . there was two of them. There was a hotel, and the other I consider a hotel, it was so large. I don't know what it was a . . . you know, too large to be a house, just a house. And, uh, next to that, right on the corner was this church. I don't know if it was Baptist or not, whatever. But we used to pass that, and then there's only a block more to school.

MARY ANN: Now in school, who taught you in St. Peter's in those days?

RALPH: In those days, it was all nuns. And in those days—it's funny, when you did get corrected, whether they spanked you or hit you on the hand, you didn't run home to Mama and Daddy and let them know about it 'cause you'd probably get more. Because they do believe that, you know, you were corrected and, true, you should be so reprimanded. But, so we would keep it mum because we didn't want to get it again. We know we got—we [*laughs*], you know, that we, uh, probably, undoubtedly got corrected for something we shouldn't have done, and we have to accept the punishment.

MARY ANN: And your parents would reinforce it when you got home.

RALPH: [Oh, would they. You can bet on that.

MARY ANN: So you didn't complain?

RALPH: We did not complain 'cause we knew we were wrong, and we didn't say it's our civil rights and all this stuff. [*others laugh*]

MARY ANN: You just took it.

RALPH: We just took it. That's the only thing you could do, and it was the proper thing.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Now, do you remember the names of any of your sister—the nuns that taught you or the priests that were in the parish, or even just one name?

RALPH: [Ee . . . Well, there was—well there was Father Carroll, Father Sheeran, um, Monsignor Burn—Burns.⁵ Um . . . those are the ones I remember, mainly. Uh, in those days, because I was an altar boy—

MARY ANN: Oh, you were an altar boy?

RALPH: Oh yeah.

⁵ Father Curley may have served at that time, Ralph may be referring to Father Carroll or Father Curley.

MARY ANN: What did you do as an altar boy?

RALPH: Well, we—well, we did everything. We served Mass. Of course, part of it was in Latin. And, uh, uh, we were altar boys for weddings, funerals—in fact, uh, I was the altar boy for, uh, Carl Mangona and his wife. He always reminds me of it. [*others laugh*] Yeah.

And I can remember when we used to go to, uh, let's say it was funeral or something, or some other activity, other than the Sunday Mass. And the priests used to give us, um, little certificates there to get you free to the movies and all that stuff. They used to give you little gifts like that.

MARY ANN: Oh that's great, because you were called out of school or out of play to do that, to do funerals and—

RALPH: Well, it could be on a Saturday.

MARY ANN: So you came in on your own and did that.

[
RALPH: It could've been. Oh yeah. On your own, yeah. They—yeah, they told you when. And we used to go down there, and there was a nun there. And uh, you got dressed properly, you know, in your cassock and yer . . . blouse there, whatever.

MARY ANN: The, the cassock is what part of the—

RALPH: I think that's the black part.

MARY ANN: The black.

RALPH: And then, I don't know what you call the, uh . . . white part.

[
MARY ANN: The white part.

RALPH: I forget what you call that. I'll call it a blouse—

OTHER PERSON: [*inaudible*]

RALPH: A which?

OTHER PERSON: Surplice?

RALPH: Surplice! I don't know if that's it or not. We may be wrong, but everybody knows what the altar boys used to wear. And then, when you really got good, you got to wear the . . . red sash. [*others laugh*] Ya know?

MARY ANN: Oh, right. Right.

RALPH: Remember that?

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: That's when you were important, I guess, you know? [*laughs*]. For us, it was important, you know.

MARY ANN: Do you remember the, uh, 40 hours of . . .

RALPH: Devotion?

MARY ANN: Devotion processions where all, they had all the, uh, incense.

RALPH: [Incense. Well, I can remember when, you know, nobody touched the host in those days. That was strictly the priest.

MARY ANN: Right. Today every—just about everyone. We touch it—

RALPH: [Okay. You can—right.

MARY ANN: —the, um, the people who—the Eucharistic ministers touch it.

RALPH: [Yeah. Right, right.

MARY ANN: In those days it was just—

RALPH: Strictly priests. And if one dropped on the ground, you don't just pick it up. They would cover it with, uh, their white, uh, cloth or something like that. And then they have a procedure to—'cause it hit the ground and, the ground and all that. But that's all changed.

MARY ANN: Right. And we didn't have, um, the, uh, the chalice, the cup. We didn't drink from it.

RALPH: No, no, no, no. That's strictly the priests, the presider.

MARY ANN: Now, when you were, um, assisting the priests, when people went to Communion, it was much different than it is today.

RALPH: Yes, you had a gold, uh, plated, uh, dish on a handle that you would put under a person's chin in case it dropped. And you know, you would just—a catch all, if you will, in case something happened, a mishap. That's all we would do, uh, when—during Communion.

MARY ANN: Right. And the people, um, were kneeling. They were kneeling.

RALPH: Oh, yes.

MARY ANN: That was different, right?

RALPH: Right, they used to have the Communion rail and they were like that. And then, when they got up, another set would go in. But everybody kneeled, and everybody went to confession, uh, before you went [to Communion]. And, uh, . . . and you fasted.

MARY ANN: That's right. So those are very different than today. We're forgetting all of that.

RALPH: [Very different. It was—that's right. It was a sacrifice, more or less in those days, you know? From midnight on, you had nothing to eat and drink. And no matter if you went to eleven o'clock Mass the next day, you still did not eat and drink until after. Or, if you did, you just don't go to Communion. So—

MARY ANN: And a lot of the younger, um, people have no memory of that. So it's interesting to have that on tape.

RALPH: That's the way we used to do it.

MARY ANN: That's right. Now, being an al—and you were an altar boy for how many years?

RALPH: Oh, gosh. Probably all of my years that—from whenever they started. Let—I'm gonna guess that, what—say sixth grade right on through twelfth.

MARY ANN: That's, that's a long time.

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: So you really knew the, the—you really knew, um, everything that the altar boys were expected to do.

RALPH: Oh yeah, we, we had to re—uh, return responses in Latin.

MARY ANN: Oh, that's right. So you also had the Latin.

RALPH: Right.

MARY ANN: And you, you, um, studied that with the—in school as well as for the, uh, Mass?

RALPH: Not for the Mass. As an altar boy, you would have meetings, and the nun there would teach you the responses. And you'd go over it—repetition even if you didn't understand it, all right? You knew when to say what. And that's what you would do.

MARY ANN: Right.

RALPH: And, uh, used to have the bells ringing whenever the host would raise, you know. And then, when the, the washing of the hands and all that. The fingers.

MARY ANN: Do you miss all of that?

RALPH: In a way I do. I, I miss the structure. Now it doesn't appear—to me, because I'm born then—the structure is so loose that, uh, you know, it doesn't have that same sacrifice in it, if you will.

[00:15:10]

MARY ANN: Yes, that's right. That's, and that's quite different.

RALPH: Quite different.

MARY ANN: Well, I didn't know you had, um, you know, so many years as an altar boy. And that's very interesting to hear about. Now, um, when you went to school, um, at St. Peter's, you had—what did you have for, um, general recreation fields?

RALPH: We had a playground, with teeter-totter, swings, and was that about it? Teeter-totter and swings are all I can remember.

MARY ANN: Now I remember they had a bicycle shed. Did you ride a bicycle to school?

RALPH: No, I did not. And I don't recall a bicycle shed.

MARY ANN: They must have put that in after.

RALPH: Well, it's possible. I don't remember that.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: We had bicycle racks—just outside, it was just a metal thing with, uh, pipes going down that your tires would fit in and they hold.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: And we didn't worry about anybody stealing anything in those days. You, you didn't lock up everything, like, “Hey, if they see it—”

MARY ANN: [*inaudible*]

RALPH: Yeah. We didn't have to do that.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: And that's, that's missed, I'll tell ya.

MARY ANN: How about your homes? Did ya—well, how, how were your homes?

RALPH: Oh, they were opened. Our homes were—you didn't worry about anybody stealing from ya. You know, if there was a crook in the area, he wouldn't be there too darn long. And, uh, it just didn't happen.

MARY ANN: The neighbors would make them know—

RALPH: Neighbors—now, you gotta have a neighborhood watch even though you don't know who your neighbor is. Over there, it was automatic. Everybody watched for everybody. And it was just a way of life. You just did it. It was just like—I was mentioning where, uh, I can remember constantly the women getting outside sweeping the road because they didn't like it was dirty, you know? And nobody threw stuff. If one ever did, they'd be out there cleaning it up, you know? They didn't have money.

MARY ANN: So they would mai-[*clears throat*]-maintain—did it's own maintenance, like on a daily basis?

RALPH: Well, they did that because they wanted cleanliness around 'em. You didn't have to have money to be clean. You just had to have the desire. That's all.

MARY ANN: And a broom.

RALPH: And a broom. That's all. You know, you didn't get paid for it or anything like that. But it was just a sense of pride, more or less.

MARY ANN: Mm-hmm.

RALPH: And we never had dirty streets or junk thrown all over.

MARY ANN: Yeah, well hopefully that, that will be coming back and staying with us. People that are here now, you know, the places are, um, just maintained beautifully.

RALPH: Yeah. Well, we're try—they're trying, but you've got some that—like I don't even know my neighbors, okay?

MARY ANN: So in the olden day—in the olden days [*laughs*—in the, past, when you were younger—

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: —you kne—you knew just about everyone throughout the neighborhood.

RALPH: Sure, my neighbors—Costanzo's—Joe's Market right next to me. And then the DeRossi's. And across the street was, uh, DeGregory's. And across from them was Fusco's Restaurant. Then there was Mully's Blue Room.

MARY ANN: Oh, now that's a new one. Mully's Blue Room.

RALPH: [That wa—well, that empty lot on the corner of Beekman and Oak?⁶

MARY ANN: Yeah? I always wanted to know what that was.

RALPH: There was a build—well, first of all, there was a great big building there that came down that had many families in it.

MARY ANN: That was, uh, an apartment part of the time. Apartment house.

RALPH: [I don't know—apartment house, if you will. And then, in front of that was a smaller building of considerable size, and it was called Mully's—it was Mully Adinolfi. Called his Blue Room, which was pool and stuff like that.

MARY ANN: Oh, great. A pool hall.

RALPH: Okay, that was right across from DeRossi's restaurant here on the corner. And then, on the other side was Joe's Store. I can't think of his name. Joe—

MARY ANN: Was it [*inaudible*]?

RALPH: No, it starts with a C. I, I can't think of his name. But he had a store right next door to us, which is 60 Beekman.

MARY ANN: Okay.

RALPH: Okay. And then you cross the alley.

MARY ANN: Mm-hmm.

RALPH: And you go to the corner, and there was that corner grocery store.

MARY ANN: Was that the DeGearo's?⁷

RALPH: It was as long as I can remember.

MARY ANN: Mm-hmm.

OTHER PERSON: Consiglio?

RALPH: Consiglio is the name. Joe Consiglio and his son Jerry. I remember them. And, uh, then, across the street was the whole clan of the, um, lemme see—the Mansons.

⁶ He is referring to the southwest corner that was empty at the time of the interview.

⁷ DeGearo's was located on the northeast corner of Beekman and Ash Streets.

MARY ANN: Oh yeah.

RALPH: Remember the Mansons? And, uh, who are the other ones there? The Levos.

MARY ANN: Oh yeah.

RALPH: Okay? And we knew everybody. There's Bart's shoe shop.

MARY ANN: Which is still there.

RALPH: Yeah, which is Bart's Shoe Hospital or whatever. And, uh, then we knew—everybody knew everybody. We'd talk and have fun. And then, you go around a corner and you got, uh, Colamaria's Restaurant. And go further, you got Ma DeMartino's, which are no longer there.⁸

MARY ANN: Oh yeah.

RALPH: [*clears throat*] Cottone's Bakery—⁹

MARY ANN: Oh yeah.

RALPH: —on the corner.

[
MARY ANN: We need a bakery.

RALPH: Yeah, now it's—I don't know what it is for—somethin' to do with horses or something.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Yeah. Pharmas—pharmaceuticals.¹⁰

[00:20:00]

RALPH: Something like that.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Um, when you're—people are recalling these places, uh, that the businesses—that seemed to be an advantage to the neighborhood, to have the, a business and perhaps a family living upstairs. The mixed usage—

RALPH: Oh yeah.

MARY ANN: —in the neighborhood, seemed to enliven the neighborhood and make it, uh, also safer. Is that the right image that I'm gathering?

[

⁸ Ma DeMartino's Restaurant was on Ash Street.

⁹ Cottone's Bakery was located on the corner of Elm and Ash Streets.

RALPH: That, that's, that is true, but also, all these restaurants flourished—or all the Italian restaurants—because the, the summer visitors. You could see 'em come over, in those days, and they're in real dressy outfits and all that. And they'd be sitting in the summer garden over at DeRossi's and candlelight and all that stuff, and he had a great bar there under there and all that. And we used to look right down on 'em. Our house—our bedroom house or our—used to be our front room in the old house, on 16 Oak—would, you'd look right down—'cause he used to put up a tent. And right at the V, we would have a window. Then we could look right down on everybody. [*others laugh*] And my children were very small, and they used to wave to 'em, and the people loved 'em.

DOLORES: They were talk back to them sometimes.

RALPH: Yeah, they would—'cause they were very small then, you know.

MARY ANN: What a beautiful picture.

RALPH: And, uh, and I've even brought 'em over there. They wanted 'em—some ladies—bring 'em down. So we brought 'em, little Mary or Michael down. They were—we're talking small.

MARY ANN: Yeah. So that is—so it was really a good thing to have all those—

RALPH: It, it was an excellent thing. You had a lotta people, and you didn't have to worry about, ya know—you didn't worry about mugging and all that sort of nonsense. You know, everybody—I'm not saying nobody ever stole anything, but it wasn't big time. You didn't worry about drugs. You didn't worry about, you know, sassing back and all that stuff. Everybody more or less, knew they were part of society and wanted to fit in. They didn't say, "I'm an individual. I'm going to be different by doing this."

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: You know, they fitted in, uh, in their own style. I'm not saying everybody swept the streets, but maybe everybody, "Hey, that bicycle part don't belong there. Let me get it out." They would do that, or another person might sweep, and I'm not just saying that's all they did. Even when they talked and got together—if you had a picnic and people were there, they'd come over, you know?

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: We used to play bocce and all that stuff.

MARY ANN: Now where did you play bocce ball?

RALPH: A lot of it was at Alett—Perry Street where Aletta hit Perry. My uncle's house was there. And we used to play in the road, and it'd be a lot of the old guys, you know, and us too, you know, but the older guys. And boy, they really had fun playin' in the road, right, right in the road. [

MARY ANN: So that was in the summertime, they played that?

RALPH: Yeah. And then they used to go sit down in, uh, his yard, which had, uh—we'd call it fav, okay?¹¹ It's sort of like a bean. You just pull it off the vine. You open it up, and it's probably the size of a lima bean, and we'd say fav. And with bread and wine, and you'd sit around, and you had that. And you'd go back and play. And you'd play for drinks—being wine, the drink of the day, of course.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: And, uh, we had a lot of fun.

MARY ANN: Did people make that wine in the neighborhood?

RALPH: Oh yes. My uncle always made wine. My dad made wine, too. As a matter of fact, it's so old, I still got about 15 gallons down in the cellar.

MARY ANN: You do?

RALPH: Yeah, but I don't know if it's drinkable. [*laughs*] I did go through it last year. Got rid of some. The other—it's drinkable. But, uh, I don't know. It wouldn't be the same stuff. But it's old, I'll tell you that. Dad's been gone since '86, and it was probably five years old before that.

MARY ANN: So it's, um, about 20 years old, each bottle?

RALPH: [Sure. Sure.

MARY ANN: [*inaudible*] —in gallons?

RALPH: I got two five gallon— jugs.

MARY ANN: [I mean, jugs.

RALPH: Jugs. Yeah.

MARY ANN: So it was glass, or—

RALPH: Yeah. Yeah, they used to be in, um, oak barrels. Used to be whiskey barrels. That's what you used to do it in. Old whiskey barrels—you'd get 'em, 'cause they could only use 'em once as whiskey barrels.

MARY ANN: Okay.

¹¹ Ralph seems to refer to fava beans, also called broad beans and, in Italian, *fava*. Ralph seems to shorten *fava* to *fav*. This may be a shorter version of an Italian word, which follows a Ralph's pattern for other words with Italian origin.

RALPH: Then we would get 'em, and then you use them to, uh, ferment the wine, and then to store it. You'd draw it out and store it in those. But, of course, it, it's working all the time in the wood and all that stuff, you know. So when you draw it in a bottle, it quits. It's supposed to hold there.

MARY ANN: So you're familiar with the winemaking process?

RALPH: Uh, very . . . little bit of it though, let me tell you. There's a certain thing about X amount of days—my dad, "You gotta mix so much of the white with so much of the red." 'Cause I used to go with Dad with a box trailer down to Albany right at the train station. When they'd come in from California, we'd load—buy 'em right there by the boxes, the white grape, will be in zinfandel, and the allegande—allegande white and zinfandel was the red.¹²

[00:25:01]

MARY ANN: And then so you would go to Albany to pick up these grapes?

RALPH: Right. And my dad would say, you know, like, "Twenty of the zinfandel, of ten of the allegande." I don't know it exactly. He was the guy that did that. I did the drivin'.

MARY ANN: Right. Now when you got 'em home, what did you do with the grapes then?

RALPH: Oh, then he went through the process. You got a crusher over an open oak barrel. You jus' set it on top—put the grapes in. You jus' crush 'em through. And then you move 'em a little bit every day or something, like—by moving it, you just had like a crisscross on the end of a two-by-four, if you will. So, take, uh, just, uh, you plunge down, you grab something, you just shake 'em up a bit, more or less. And then in a certain amount of days, they would start bubblin', and—'cause it's working. And then, uh, Dad would know when—you don't let it keep going forever. Certain amount of days, whatever that was, he'd say, "Okay, we gotta draw it out." Then you draw it out into the new barrels and—course when you draw it out, you're not shakin' it up. You siphon it out. So you get most of—you know, just the juices, okay? The wine, if you will. The others, you would just—when you get down, you got a lotta grapes, stems and everything. Spiders, if you will, I don't care what you got in there. *[laughs]* And you would take that and put it in the press. And then the press, you would squeeze and get just about as much juice again because a lot of it just doesn't escape it seems. So that's what the press was for. Justa get all the grape you can. Then you *[claps]* end up with just a flat cake of grapes you can throw away or put in the yard for fertilizer, or whatever.

MARY ANN: So every bit of it was used?

RALPH: Oh yeah. You used everything.

MARY ANN: Everything.

¹² We could not confirm the name of for the allegande grape varietal.

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: And then you would have a supply—

RALPH: Uh-huh.

MARY ANN: —for the whole year?

RALPH: That's correct.

MARY ANN: And then you'd do the same thing the next year?

RALPH: That's what you do.

MARY ANN: Wel—so, um, do you have any of these of, um—

RALPH: I've actually got a press, a crusher. They're heavy.

MARY ANN: They're heavy?

RALPH: Oh, are they heavy. Uh, they're just a regular wine press. Well, you've seen 'em around. People now use 'em for planters, an all that stu—oh yeah.

MARY ANN: [Really? Yeah.

Ralph: I seen as, you know—they don't use it for wine, so who—make something out of it.

MARY ANN: Yeah, yeah. Now, did your family also have—besides the grapes and the grapes, um, and the wine, did you also have a garden?

RALPH: Yes.

MARY ANN: In the neighborhood?

RALPH: Oh. Oh, we've always had a garden. Dad would always have a garden—not very big. But we had a garden. We used to live in 62 Beekman.

MARY ANN: 62 Beekman, okay.

RALPH: And in the back, there was a yard. And when—in fact, even in the summer we used to plant, uh, celery. I can remember celery that came out beautiful. They were humungous, and two of 'em would fill a bushel basket.

MARY ANN: In the cellar?

RALPH: In the cellar. I can remember that. They were like milk, they were so tender. But on the outside, we also had—naturally, you gotta have tomatoes with Italian. And, uh, peppers, and stuff like that. And, uh, cabbage and whatever Dad would put in. Yeah, we always had one.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Now, you—so, during the summer, you ate from the garden?

RALPH: That's true. Or, we ate from the garden and from last winter, whatever Mom would preserve. Canning.

MARY ANN: Okay. She did canning?

RALPH: Oh yeah, canning and pickling.

MARY ANN: And what—and, and so what did she can, and what did she, what did she have?

RALPH: Tomatoes, pears, um—what did she can? Mai—mainly tomatoes and fruit. And, uh—oh, for canning, you know—beans, string beans and stuff like that there. But then in the vats—we had a couple vats—she would go pickle, more or less. It would be, uh, eggplants, okay, which were great in a salad and or a sandwich. And, oh, and peppers. And those were the pickled things that we would do.

MARY ANN: So you ate from that garden year round, also?

RALPH: Yeah. Oh yeah.

[00:29:08]

MARY ANN: Now, when you were growing up, and also when you were raising your own family, what, um, uh, what stands out as far as, uh, holidays or celebrations in this neighborhood?

RALPH: Well . . . as a kid—

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: —before my own family, okay? Uh, it was such a thrill, you know, for Christmas. That was the big thing, ya know. And we used to save money. We didn't have much. But we used to save what we could, and we tried to get the most we could for our money, ya know. I can remember bringing dishes, sets of dishes—and my uncle'd buy dishes and all that—and put it on our sled, and we would drag it to my uncle's house where—you had to go to the oldest one, which'd be my uncle, older'n my father. [*laughs*]

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: Yeah. It was a sign of respect to go to *their* house for Christmas festivities and for a meal and all that. They'd almost be insulted [*laughs*] if you didn't, you know?

So—we used to bring—through the snow, drag on our sled—gifts for everybody as best we could, you know? I mean, it was a—and, feast. Boy, in those days, you know, you talk about feast. You really ate great. And, uh . . . it was—everybody was ready for Christmas. You didn't know, you didn't say, "I want this. I want that." Alright? Whatever you got, you appreciated, ya know? And it isn't like, ya know, the kids sees on TV, "That's what I want." And he don't get that, he's mad. Well, when we got something, we were happy.

MARY ANN: Did you have Christmas stockings? Did you put your stocking up?

RALPH: No, no. But we had—I don't recall that. But, uh, possibly, yeah. But, uh, we always had goodies all over the place as in, you know, all homemade, whether it's cookies, candy, ya know?

MARY ANN: Yeah. And I sh—

RALPH: Desserts. Oh. Crazy.

MARY ANN: And who made all these things?

RALPH: I'm afraid it wasn't the men. [*laughs*] It was the women.

MARY ANN: So that would be your mother?

RALPH: My mother, my aunt, their daughters, an stuff like that.

MARY ANN: And so they were baking and cooking and—

RALPH: Yeah. It's just like the old weddings that we used to go to.

MARY ANN: What were they like, and where were they held?

RALPH: Well, they had 'em in the Casino down here. And, uh, it wasn't catered. You brought your wine. You brought your liquor. You brought—ya know, you got—you had to buy, you know, kegs of beer, whatever. You didn't have sit-down meals. You had boxes that the women would make the night before, or whatever, of sandwiches, all individually wrapped, all kinds. And ya used to have, ya know, peanuts going all day—and it wasn't little bags. You had a regular burlap bag, fifty pounds of peanuts. They'd just rip it open, set it here or set it there—one here, one there. People'd just help themselves. And wands and Italian cookies.¹³ They weren't bought. You did 'em. And it was a great time.

And you, course, you had your band, ya know? And, uh, dancing and music and all that stuff. And food. Not a sit-down meal, strictly. Almost informal formal. Everybody knew what you were there for. And boy, you had a good time.

MARY ANN: And it was a celebration.

¹³ Ralph mentions wands as a form of Italian pastry.

RALPH: It was a celebration. It sure was.

MARY ANN: Do you know who, who played the music at these? Because it was live music, wasn't it?

RALPH: It was live music, yes.

MARY ANN: Do you remember who they [*unclear*]?

RALPH: I really don't remember. It could be, uh, . . . I really don't know. But there was Frank Sally used to play a heck of a mandolin. And, uh, some of the guys guitar, who on the . . . accordion and whatever it was, a band that knew how to play. Trumpets and all that other stuff. They had a good band. And I really don't know their names or whatever, but there was music. There was.

MARY ANN: Those weddings were wonderful.

RALPH: Sure were.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Now, when you were growing up, and you went, um—after grade school, you went to St. Peter's Academy High School.

RALPH: Yeah. Yes.

MARY ANN: What did teenagers do? I mean, you went to weddings, 'cause they were your—you were invited to every wedding.

RALPH: Yeah. Right. Teenagers, we were more into hobbies—who loved comic books, who liked to make model airplanes. You'd get together and do that stuff. Uh, you'd get these little cars and you'd race 'em, whether you put those little CO2 bottles in the back. If you punch a hole, it's like a jet and you shoot them—

MARY ANN: Oh, I don't know about those.

RALPH: Well, they're little cars that have a round hole in the back, and you usually got 'em on a string. You stretch a string a long ways so that it will ride straight. And then you had this little tool effect that you put on the end of this bottle, and you press a trigger, like, and then the little needle'll come out and punch a hole in it. So then, now that relea—on the seltzer bottles, I believe they used these CO2 little, little cartridges. You know what I—

MARY ANN: Does someone do that today?

RALPH: I don't know if they do that today. I remember doing it in and you—[*imitates sound of toy*] and boy did that thing fly out—it's a jet, little jet car. And, um—then we used to, of course, we hadda pitch pennies. We hadda play marbles, and we had to, uh—what else did we do besides

that? Oh, we also had to pitch, uh, war cards. They call 'em war cards, which are like baseball cards.

MARY ANN: Okay, but they're war with—

RALPH: Well they were, we al—I've always known 'em as war cards, but they could be anything.

MARY ANN: Do you have any of those?

RALPH: I'm not sure if I got anymore of those anymore.

MARY ANN: Was that pictures of tanks on 'em, or—

[00:34:54]

RALPH: Well, it could have—it could be a war. It could be baseball people. It could be almost anything, and you just—you stand a certain distance like on a curb, and you, ya jus' pitch 'em to a back wall. The closest one collects 'em all and gets them. Just like pitching pennies.

MARY ANN: Pennies.

RALPH: Who's ever the clos—yeah. You throw 'em as close as you can to the wall. The closest one takes all the rest that . . . did not get that close.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: And then of course we had movies. We used to go to the movies a lot.

MARY ANN: Where did you go to the movies?

RALPH: Most—well there was the Congress [Theater].

MARY ANN: Okay, Congress.

RALPH: Congress, and then there was the Community [Theater].¹⁴ There was another one I don't even remember, but Congress was the main one. And my brother and I used to go there. I don't know what—I think it was like eleven cents. We would go to next door, Well's Drugstore, and for six cents, get a Hershey bar that was humongous, you know? It wasn't these little "pinny" ones you see now. I mean, boy, for six cents, we could share that and have a feast. And then—

MARY ANN: And you could bring that in?

RALPH: Yes.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

¹⁴ The Congress Theater and the Community Theater were on Broadway.

RALPH: And then we'd go for a nickel to the movie 'cause I was—being short—would always pass as underage. [*others laugh*] Wasn't that terrible of me? [*laughs*] I can remember the days you'd go in there and it was Dish Day. They'd give you a dish.

MARY ANN: [Alright, Dish Day. What did you do? Did you bring a dish?

RALPH: No. No, no. When you went in there with the admission ticket, they'd give you a dish. Then you could get sets, you know, in time.

MARY ANN: Does anyone have any of those dishes anymore?

RALPH: Gosh, I don't know. I can remember—I probably do, but I—it'd be hard for me to say that they are those or something, ya know.

MARY ANN: So you'd get a dish and you'd bring it—

RALPH: Yeah, bring it home. It'd be a soup dish this week. Next week, it might be a, a cup, matching cup. The next time might be a saucer. And every time each person goes in there an gets, gets one of them.

MARY ANN: Oh, gosh. That's great.

RALPH: The Community Theater was good too.

DOLORES: Tell her when you got caught at the Community Theater.

RALPH: Congress.

DOLORES: Congress.

RALPH: Oh yeah. I remember when I s—I don't know if I should put this on record. My goodness. 'Cause they may come back and ask for their money. [*others laugh*] For the longest time, I'd pass, as I said, as underage 'cause of my size. You know how I got caught? I had my graduation ring on one time. [*others laugh*]

MARY ANN: Oh, your class ring?

RALPH: My class ring.

MARY ANN: And what did they say to you?

RALPH: “You're no—you're not under ten,” [MARY ANN: *laughs*] or whatever the age was. And so, I had to own up to it. So then I hadda pay.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Oh, that's a great story.

RALPH: Yeah, it was great. I was embarrassed and because I was a hundred, “Don’t let Dad hear about this.” [*laughs*] Which he never did.

MARY ANN: Yeah. Now, what did you do in the summer time?

RALPH: Well—

MARY ANN: When you were growing up?

RALPH: I would lo—well, I used sneak out of the store. We had a store.

MARY ANN: Okay—

RALPH: And then I would lock—

MARY ANN: And where was your store at that time?

RALPH: 62 Beekman.

MARY ANN: Okay.

RALPH: And sometimes when Dad would go an lemon ice, out on the truck, and the devil in me would close the door and we’d go swimmin’ or something like that.

MARY ANN: Where’d you go swimming’?

RALPH: To—we used to go out to Slade’s, Slade’s swimming hole, okay?¹⁵ And, uh, I couldn’t swim. And I was there alone once, and I had one of these Navy floaters around me. They’re snapped, and it snapped off. An I’m splashing away, an I—good thing there was another one in the water. There was nobody there but me. I grabbed that one, and I—it’s a short distance, but I couldn’t move. But with that I was able to kick myself to shore. And I—“No more of that.” I was shaken up, I’ll tell ya.

MARY ANN: So you stayed in the store after that?

RALPH: Well, I didn’t go swimming alone, let’s put it that way. And of course we used to have crap games there, too, you know they’d shoot dice, pennies, and all that.

MARY ANN: Where?

¹⁵ The John A. Slade, an attorney, lived on Grand Avenue, just past the railroad overpass, on the left. Known as Chestwood, a long driveway goes to the house, which cannot be seen with all the leaves and pines. There was a creek on the property where many generations went swimming, in walking distance from the Dublin area. The creek has dried up due to development in the area. Caroline Beach Slade, his wife was a published author and early social worker in Saratoga County.

RALPH: At Slade's on the bank.

MARY ANN: Really?

RALPH: Oh yeah, 'cause nobody was around, we could do that. But outside of the play part, I also used to work. I used to go around an shine shoes all through Broadway, and I used to make some money, ya know?

MARY ANN: Now, if you were gonna go out and shine shoes, what would you—have your own stuff?

RALPH: I had my own gear. I had my own box with a, you know, it looks like a shoe thing on the top where you set your feet, an your stuff inside. Just a regular little box. An I'd—"Anybody? Shine shoes?"—whether they're white, black, brown, or black and white.

MARY ANN: Yeah. And how old were you when you were doing that?

RALPH: Oh, God. It, it . . . I don't know.

MARY ANN: Like, grade school?

RALPH: Grade school and into high school possibly.

MARY ANN: And so, so you would head downtown.

RALPH: Yep.

MARY ANN: And would you be assigned to a spot? How did that work, the territory?

RALPH: Oh, no, no. No. Just walk the street an, "Want your shoes shined?" And all that stuff, ya know? Or they'd see ya an, "Boy, you wanna shine my shoes?" "Yes." It's, "Hooray!" This is money. Whether it was a nickel or dime, I can't remember, but that was money.

MARY ANN: So you could earn money that way.

RALPH: Right. Well . . . other than that, there's no other way that I woulda earned money because I was supposed to be at the store.

[00:40:00]

MARY ANN: The store.

RALPH: I would help Dad, somewhat, makin' lemon ice, clean up, and all that, and run the store.

MARY ANN: Tell me about the store and what, you know, what—

RALPH: Very small store. It was no foodstuffs. It was candy, cigarettes, a few little novelties, and that's about all there was to that there. It wasn't groceries, ya know?

MARY ANN: Yeah. Now, but then, did you sell the lemon ice from there?

RALPH: Yes. We sold it from there and also the truck. Course if I wasn't there, we didn't sell too much, you know.

MARY ANN AND OTHERS: [*laugh*]

RALPH: I was a bad little boy, back then. But, I just wanted to get away. And here I am now doing it. Can you imagine? I was trying to get away from it, and here I am. I'm into it.

MARY ANN: Well, I know we have, you know—we have this on paper. But I would like to hear you tell me, you know, in your own words, um, about the lemon ice, uh, business and how, you know, how it started, and how it evolved. And how it was, and where it is today.

RALPH: Well, in the old days, you only had lemons—'cause there was lemons available—orange ice—'cause there was orange available—and, uh, limes. That was mainly lemon and orange, but limes also. And you hadda hand squeeze them at that time. And, uh, . . . so Dad hadda hand squeeze the le—if he was gonna make lemon. He knew what to do. I don't really know, but he hadda squeeze the lemons by hand. He had to add the sugar and the water, and all that. And then the bucket that you froze it in was set inside of a wooden tub, which had to be packed with ice and you sprinkled rock salt in there too in order to give it more coldness. The melting would make it colder. And you hadda keep choppin' ice round it and you hadda turn it by hand—hand crank to make the ice. And when you got done with that, you had to take the cover off and the beater. Then you hadda scoop it from there—that can into another can that was packed in another box, if you will. His first box was on a wagon that you pull through the streets. [*clears throat*] So—

MARY ANN: Did he have pictures of that?

RALPH: No.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: And he had to take it—pack those with ice and salt to keep 'em cold, and then transfer it from there into there. Then you had to do another batch of whatever. And it's all by hand. Then he had to drag it through the streets to sell it. Then he got big and got a quarter horsepower motor that drove the thing for him, so he didn't have to hand crank it. But he still had to chop ice around and scoop it out and all that. So that saved him a little.

Then later on, he got to a point where he got a truck, an old truck instead of the wagon. An course, you had to put the boxes in an chop ice around that, too. But then in the later years, he finally got a, a modern machine where you just had to poor the stuff in, you raised the handle, it

came out. Which is still—well, it sorta passed away this year. I have a new machine though, but it—the original one for the last 40 years or whatever was, uh . . .

MARY ANN: Just replaced?

RALPH: It was—well, between that one, he had one that, um, would chop the ice for him, but I was scared of it. It was a humongous machine and it would also drive the, uh, the beater so you didn't have to hand crank. But the ice, you'd take a, you know, fifty-pound chunk, you'd throw it in there, and there's a humongous wheel with big claws on it, you know probably an inch down to a point, that would go through slots. And the bottom, you know, maybe a two-inch slot, it would just speed through there and it would just chop the ice through there. Then you shovel it out. But I was always afraid of that 'cause I heard it was in a bakery. That machine was for dough. It was in a bakery. And it grabbed the guy's hand and dragged him right through, you know. And boy, I was—when my father got near that machine I was always afraid for 'im, you know? Nothin' happened, but I wanted to see that machine go so bad 'cause I had this vision, you know? There's no way of saving anybody.

MARY ANN: Right.

RALPH: And uh . . . that machine was the only one that ever scared me. And, uh, you know I, I'd push in there myself, and I'd throw the ice in. I don't want 'im gettin' near it or somethin' like that. So . . . glad to see that one go.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: That, that's when he got the big—the new machine, which, no ice, just, you know, Freon and stuff, air conditioning stuff that would do it.

MARY ANN: And you used that one for forty years?

RALPH: Oh, yeah. Well over forty years, so. That made it a lot easier. Then he got the truck in '54, which I still use now. And he had that cut out for the windows that he had then. It's still the same. And he had the boxes custom built to fit around the wheels and fit in there. And, uh, same thing to hold the size tubs he had. [*clears throat*] Course, in tho—[*clears throat*]. Excuse me.

[01:45:13]

[*audio break, followed by silence*]

[01:45:42]

MARY ANN: Ralph, now, um, the neighborhood—uh, you're living on Oak Street, uh, across the street from the Principessa Elena Society, and right in the heart of—to me, this is the heart of the neighborhood. Um, because when I come here in the summertime, um, St. Michael's is

happening. And this seems to be right where it's centered, right in front of your house. Can you talk to me about Principessa Elena and St. Michael's?¹⁶

RALPH: Well, the home is definitely across the street from my house, true. But the hub of Dublin, as we know it, was really Beekman, Ash, Oak, up to Grand Avenue. That was really the hub. And then go down to Elm Street in the other direction, South Franklin in the other. So the home is a little off center for what we considered the hub of Dublin.

But now, St. Michael, literally, is right in front of my house and along this one street, the short street of Oak. Okay? Years past, even though the home was here, it would be—they would block off streets from, oh, Oak Street and little bit beyond, up to Grand Avenue, up to, uh, Elm, and to South Franklin. All four blocks.

And they used to have lights strung on—not just strings of light, they were designed lights. You know, like a double string goin' across, and maybe five foot in between the two strings, and then there'd be a circle around and then, uh, wire mesh, the, whatever you want to call it, like a figure of a star. And so that they could put the lights. And then, there was really pretty lights, and they used to have 'em strung all the way around for the whole four different blocks. That was when it was big.

And, uh, the parade would start from Mass at St. Peter's. And they would go through all the streets, a lot of the streets, with the firework man following. And when people would, uh, pin money on the saint—in front of the house that they do, whether for a loved one or whatever, in honor of St. Michael—they would get a barrage [of fireworks]. People would clear, and they would put a string of these fireworks and, uh—as far as aerals, I think there even was some aerals. But mainly a big bomb, boo-boom. Boy, they really made noise.

And then they—the band would be playing and then you go down to another street and somebody else would stop you and . . . and it was a lot of people marching: elderly ladies, young ladies, young kids, boys carryin' either the saint or the banner or the boat, and different things like that. And it was quite a large, uh, undertaking and everybody had fun. And then you'd end up at the home where they would disperse, the band that is. And the festivities would begin, such as there'd be music, entertainment, all the time.

And there was—we had the grease pole. If you—that was just a, uh, sort of, if you will, a little bit thinner than a telephone pole. Quite a bit thinner. But, you know, um—I don't know, I'll guess at eight inches diameter, maybe. And then at the very top, there would be a ring nailed up there, big ring made out of wood. And tied all around that thing would be whole provolones, sausages, um, Italian pastries, you know—all these good things. And you try—whoever could get up to the top, owned it. But my new—first of all, the pole itself was slick—no bark on it. It was slick to begin with, and then they would grease it. Uh, I can't really remember the grease. It wouldn't be, uh, grease that would get ya too dirty or anything like that, but you did have an outfit to put on, you know, like a disposable thing. And you could try.

¹⁶ The Principessa Elena Society is a fraternal association founded by Italian immigrants in 1900. The organization is located at 13 Oak Street. The association was a principle sponsor of the street procession of the Feast of St. Michael.

Usually the guys got up two feet, and they slide back down. That's the end, you know? You couldn't stack guys on top, you hadda start from the bottom. Eventually the slickness would wear off, and somebody would get to the top and get all the goodies. And, uh—

[00:50:04]

MARY ANN: Did you ever try to go up?

RALPH: No.

MARY ANN: Do you know of anyone who ever made it the top?

RALPH: I, I know they have, but I can't think of anybody personally.

And then there's, um, they have like, you know, like a spaghetti eating contest and a pie eating contest, and then entertainment, you know, by dancing groups or singers an bands. And, uh, it was quite a, uh, quite a big affair. It was attended by a lotta people.

Now we're down to one block for—'cause we're trying to reinstate it. It's a small scale. Whether it can get larger, it's really up to the people. You know, if you don't participate, you can't just keep doing this an, you know, and it's not goin' anywhere. You don't mind doing it year after year if you see it's going somewhere. And—

MARY ANN: Right. Now, when you were growin' up, it was in what month, though? Was it—

RALPH: September. Always September.

MARY ANN: Alright. Okay.

RALPH: And . . . and it was, uh, rather beautiful.

MARY ANN: And, and now it's in—always going to be in August.

RALPH: Well, they're making it in August. I still like to see September. But their, their leaders that be or whatever, are ch—they opt for August. And, uh, they think it's gonna help 'em.

MARY ANN: Mm-hmm.

RALPH: I'm of opposition to that. I don't think it will. Because you're going get the regular people, and I'm afraid the regular people in August are workin'—for the track or, doin' that—and I don't—I'd rather get 'em when the regular people are back to their schools, back to their,

uh, regular jobs and not have a second job at the track or sellin' this or selling that during the month of August. But that's just an opinion.¹⁷

MARY ANN: Right. Yeah.

RALPH: And . . . so they're gonna do it again this year. I think they're gonna extend to one more day. They're gonna go to, uh, three days.

MARY ANN: Three nights.

RALPH: Insteada two. Two was last year, and I think the year before was one or two—two also. So now they're gonna go to three and, uh, try to enlarge it. You know, you gotta crawl before you can walk. So they're tryin' to reinstate it—which would be a nice thing. I mean, we don't have any real block parties by a organization, per se. Well, course we have the Caroline Street, but that's by all the business people. And you got a lot of, uh, lot of input and a lotta people doing that. Here, we're by ourselves. We're an entity all by ourselves. If we don't get 'em from our own little group, then we don't get.

MARY ANN: Mm-hmm. Now, when you were growing up and, uh, St. Michael's today, now it was much bigger, it was held out on more streets and there were more vendors.

[
RALPH: Oh, four or five times. Oh yes.

MARY ANN: Were they all vendors, or did you—did, did the stores, and the, um, restaurants and the, uh, individual homes, participate?

[
RALPH: Both. Both. We had vendors, that—I, I guess that they must have—I don't remember or know. I don't know. I do remember, uh, vendors that either paid a certain amount per night. Or then we had other people—it could be myself. I remember sellin' hot dogs in front of my store. Now, ya see? You know, on a burner and get 'em goin'. And other people sellin' wands they may have made in packages. And, uh, restaurants may be selling something else.¹⁸

I can say, I don't believe we ever paid anything for that, in front of our own house. But I don't remember for certain. But I do remember the bandstand was right on the corner. And I mean, another—that was the focal point, at Beekman and Oak. Right there. That was the center. And then anything would branch out in four different directions—the lights, the music, everything.

MARY ANN: And people came from all over?

¹⁷ In this context, Ralph mentions regular people to refer to local residents who lived year round in Saratoga Springs. This contrasts with the people who lived in Saratoga Springs during the summer horse-racing season in July and August. During these summer months, year-round residents may have been working extra jobs and perhaps living elsewhere while they rented their homes to tourists until the racing season ended.

¹⁸ Residents sold food from their front porches, a practice that was prohibited later due to food regulations.

RALPH: Yes, they did. I got—

MARY ANN: All over town?

RALPH: All over—I think out of town too, at that time. And it mighta—you know, like Mechanicsville and, uh, Ballston and stuff like that. And . . . it was a looked-forward-to affair.

MARY ANN: And did you march in the parade?

RALPH: Oh, yes. I've always done something there. And as I got older, my dad always—from my dad's part, which the pictures are—I don't know if I—I don't have 'em right here. I got 'em in the file there. Um, he always carried the flag. I can remember my dad, uh—they're all gone now.

MARY ANN: Okay, let me hear their names.

RALPH: All right there's, my dad. Then there was Frank Capone. There was, um . . . uh, gosh, I'm trying to think—Mr. Banjo.¹⁹ Um . . . uh, other people, with no reason, that marched with us.²⁰ It was always Mr. Agosta. Uh, Mr., um . . . oh God, I can't think of his name. He lives right down here on the corner. Right down, next door to me. I can't think of his name any longer—course he's been gone a long, long time.

MARY ANN: Mr. Scavone?

RALPH: No. Scavone lived across the street. There was Cosmo. And, uh...you know, I—if I had to pin to names, I can't think—Mr. Grolley, of course. But a lot of them marched every year, um . . . I want to call—is it Cardillo? George Cardillo?

OTHER: Frank.

RALPH: Frank, Frank Cardillo.

MARY ANN: Frank. Yeah.

RALPH: Alright. And, uh...jeepers. I got pictures of these guys but I can't hit their names. Probably, if I looked at it—

MARY ANN: And they carried flags, and—

RALPH: Some of 'em. My father always carried a flag, and so did the Capones—

MARY ANN: So they had the American flag—

¹⁹ The Bencivenga family was known by the nickname the Banjo family.

²⁰ Ralph refers to residents who were not club officers or other notable people who joined the processions.

RALPH: —Frank and Pat. They had the American flag, the Italian flag, and the Italian banner, okay? And sometimes they had the banner with St. Michael . . . versus a flag. But it was like a flag. It's on cloth, mounted on a frame and you carried it like a flag.

MARY ANN: Now, the statue, I understand, at one time was in St. Peter's Church. Is that the same statue that's in the, uh, Principessa Elena?

RALPH: I can't tell you that for certain without finding out. Yes, there was one. I'm not sure. I was under the impression—I may be wrong—that this statue was presented to the church, and they kept it at the church in the basement and brought it out on St. Michael's. Then eventually it got back into our hands. If that's correct, I don't know. It mighta been the other way around. They had St. Michael's, and they said, "Well, if you want it, you can have it," or somethin'—I don't know. I don't know.

MARY ANN: 'Cause that happened a long time ago.

RALPH: Yes. 'Cause there's more than one. There's two statues. There's one in the hall, and I believe there's one upstairs, a little bit smaller. And I don't know which one we're talking about that was at St. Peter's. I really don't know the origin of where they came from.

MARY ANN: Right. It's interesting to try to hunt this down.

RALPH: Yes.

MARY ANN: Now, Ralph, I want to hear about, um, bocce ball at the Principessa Elena Society, and also a card game?

RALPH: Oh, yes.

MARY ANN: Was it brisc? Brisc?

RALPH: Well, we're goin' back a few years. And, uh—

MARY ANN: Yeah, I want to hear about that.

RALPH: We used to have a lotta fun. There, the guys played boch. An we used to play for drinks, of course. And, uh, also for our dignity, we hadda win, ya know.

OTHERS: *laugh*

RALPH: And so, we had a lotta fun at that game. And, uh, we played it not only there, but we played it—

MARY ANN: Where, where did you play over here though? Was it inside did you play?

RALPH: Well, yes, it was inside. It mighta been outside for a few years, but then we had an inside court.

MARY ANN: Court, which no longer exists.

RALPH: Right. It's there, but it's under cover. It's part of the floor. It's not opened up anymore.

MARY ANN: Okay, that's—and so you would go there and you'd have a league there.

RALPH: We would have a league, that's correct. Every certain day, we'd go at a certain time. And we'd have a league, an have a banquet, just like if you were playing, you know, if you were bowling or something, so, so many weeks, an all that. An you have a nice banquet, 'n prizes and all that good stuff. Of course, we also played at the outside a lot at the ITAM at one time.²¹ 'Cause there was a lotta people there to play. Now there's nobody to play. My brother and I wanna play, of course, so I joined 'bout three years ago—my brother longer—Mechanicsville Fraternity Society, and I go there every Wednesday to play in a league.²²

MARY ANN: And they have an indoor bocce, or not?

RALPH: No, it's outdoor. They also have an indoor, but it's not really conducive to play. It's all right, okay? As a matter of fact, I belong to their dart league in the winter. And when we finish, we go down there, even though the court can go anyway it wants—it's not really a groomed court. And we have fun down there.

MARY ANN: So is that—is there any place in the neighborhood where people play bocce ball today?

RALPH: No. Oh, well—

OTHER: The Italian American War Veterans.

RALPH: Do they?

OTHER: On Grand, isn't there a little bocce ball court?

RALPH: Oh, oh ITAM? No, the courts are there, but nobody plays.

MARY ANN: Nobody plays.

RALPH: You see, we don't have anybody that—they just want to sit around, I guess.

MARY ANN: Yeah. So that's same with the card game?

[

²¹ The Dominick Smaldone Italian American War Veterans (ITAM) Post 35 is a veterans' organization located at 247 Grand Avenue.

²² The Italian Fraternal Society is located at 38 Viall Avenue, Mechanicville, New York.

RALPH: It's the same with the card game. Yes, the same with the card games, the brisc.²³ It used to be prevalent also down at that ITAM. But over here, we used to play, too. And we didn't care for money. It wasn't money. It was drinks, and then *boss* and *underboss*. Which—

MARY ANN: Oh. And now explain that to me.

RALPH: You don't know what that is? Well, you play the game. The losers pay.

MARY ANN: And this is the, um, what game is this? The—

RALPH: This is the brisc.

MARY ANN: The brisc. Okay.

RALPH: Okay? Uh, the losers pay. Let's say there's four against four. There might be two tables, four against four. So there's gonna be eight losers—I mean, four losers, four winners.

MARY ANN: Okay.

RALPH: The losers have to put enough in for two drinks, whatever the cost is. We'd limit the drinks, whatever they are. Let's say beers, or a mixed drink, same price, okay? So they each had to put it in a mug. And then you would, uh, play a game, I think, or to draw the cards, it was. In boch [bocce]²⁴ it's different. You go by the throw of the ball, and this car—you have a card, and you know how, gotta know how to read 'em, of course.

And you'd find out the best hand among the eight, and the, and the second best. The first best is gonna be the boss of all the drinks. The second best is called the underboss. Now the boss has gotta buy drinks with this money, and he's gotta have at least one drink for every member. He can't buy expensive drinks and only get two when there's eight people. He's gotta have eight drinks on that table. He can have more if he wants. But he's gotta have a minimum of eight.²⁵

Now, the boss can say, "A drink to this guy." And the underboss would say, "No." He comes back. He cannot pass a drink, unless the boss—and the underboss says okay. Usually you would honor the underboss first. You'd say, "A drink to you, my underboss." And he'd say, "Thank you." And he'd get that drink. Now he would start off, "A drink to this person." "Okay, go ahead, go ahead." "How about a beer to this person?" You go, "*La gidam*." That means, "No." Or he may say "*La gidam for de um*." That means, "I want that drink but for only one person. I want it for my buddy over here," you know. So now, he can keep saying no. Now it's up to the underboss. You—he can't stop the boss from drinkin'. The boss can drink one. Now if he drinks

²³ *Briscola* is an Italian card game, and the name may have been shortened to *brisc* ['brēsk]

²⁴ He shortens the pronunciation of the Italian *bocce* ['bā-chē] to boch ['bäch]. We did not have information to determine if the shorter pronunciation was common among Italian speakers or whether the shorter pronunciation resulted from Italian words being Anglicized in the community.

²⁵ Ralph's description is similar to a drinking game from Southern Italy called *passatella*, which involves a boss (*padrone*) and under-boss (*sotto-padrone*). We could not verify the spelling or translation of the expressions *la gidam* or *la gidam for de um*.

another one, that means there's one person who isn't gonna get a drink. So now, now, now, you find he'd say, "This guy can't drink until the Saharan Desert floods"—

MARY ANN: [laughs]

RALPH: —you know, as far as he's concerned. And yet, you'll still buy that guy a drink after the game. But you won't give him one of those. It's a pride thing, you know. And so, guys knew, "You remember when you set me dry five months ago? He can't get a drink off of me." And so, you know, you'd do that. But soon as the game is over, you'd go to the bar and buy that same guy you wouldn't give a drink, a drink.

MARY ANN: Oh my.

RALPH: But it was just a thing that you just did. It was a fun thing. It really was a lotta fun.

MARY ANN: And where did you all learn this game?

RALPH: Well, just there from our fathers, an they played too, of course. And, uh . . . did I tell you, it was just a regular card game just like you would learn, uh, gin rummy or something. It's like just a game.

MARY ANN: Are any of the generations, younger generations, learning this game, or—

RALPH: No, I don't think—no, no. Wouldn't, they're not playing, even—it used to be pretty big also at the ITAM. You know, Red San Felice, you know Ralph, and myself, my brother and a lotta guys in our age group.

And boy, those guys could get real tough. They wouldn't give you a drink. They don't care if they hadda choke 'em down. They would choke down.

Now, if you couldn't drink 'em, okay, you hadda pass 'em to the underboss, and he could do whatever he wanted. Then he could pass 'em to the guys. Before, you didn't want that to happen. [laughs] You know, not—you, you just didn't want to, to give up. So that's how you played that game. It was a fun thing all the way through, from beginning to end.

MARY ANN: And you had to keep track of a lot of things? For a long time?

RALPH: Well . . . well they did that.

MARY ANN: Yeah. [laughs]

RALPH: Some guys didn't care. Everybody drank a lotta times.

MARY ANN: But it was part of the game.

RALPH: It's part of the game.

MARY ANN: Yeah.

RALPH: You'd say, "He can't drink until the Sahara floods, as far as I'm concerned," you know.

MARY ANN: Do you think that game originated in Italy, and they brought it over with them?

RALPH: Gosh, you know, I don't know. But I gotta say that because they must have been the games our founders must have played. Same with bocce and that. I know they—I wasn't there, but I know they musta had a good time. You know, money wasn't everything . . . material things, you know. Then, they just banded together as a family and they had a ball. I'm sure that they stuck together.

MARY ANN: Oh. Sounds like the what—I'm so glad to have that, that game explained, especially the boss and underboss.

RALPH: Oh, that, that was the fun.

MARY ANN: Because I remember those terms.

RALPH: Okay.

MARY ANN: But never knew what they meant.

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: That was a great explanation. Um, I just have some things to go over here. Um, we've talked about your favorite memories and, uh—how do you feel about the years that you've lived on, in the West Side? And you've been here all your life.

RALPH: This is true. I, I gotta say I like the old way better than I see now. Um, course it was—at first it was all Irish. Then it got to be all Italian. Okay? And it was like a niche. "Here's where you live 'cause you were this ancestry," you know and all that. And you all got along together as best you could—you hollered at each other. Nobody's perfect. "Well your boy came over here, an he stepped on my grapevine," or something like that there. And oh boy, you got it then, you know. *[laughs]*

And, uh . . . in those days, like, oh, we're talking about cleaning of the streets, everything. You know, they say, "Yeah, they don't want to do nothing unless they got money now." But there, it was all done for free and for pride.

MARY ANN: Yeah, and there was great pride in this neighborhood.

RALPH: Oh, God . . . you used to be dirty, boy. When I used to go home dirty after playing, I used to get a spanking, you know. And my mother, I can remember—I mentioned Dickie Comfort. We used to play together in the sandbanks. We'd come home dirty, you know—my mother would be talking to his mother on the phone while we're both getting scrubbed down.

We were little kids then. “Don’t hit little Dickie. They’re only little children.” While she’s telling ’em not to do that ’cause he got dirty, I’m getting hit!

MARY ANN AND OTHERS: [*laughing*]

RALPH: And I’m sure it was goin’ the other way around too, you know. You know, “Oh don’t hit the pretty little child.” You know? But we knew what was going on. [*laughs*] And, uh, in those days it was a lot more fun.

MARY ANN: Yes. Yeah.

RALPH: And, uh, we didn’t have, you know, stuff they got now. We didn’t have to worry about drugs, or we didn’t have to worry about stealing or leaving your door open, or inviting someone in. You didn’t worry about that. It was . . . more geared to family, and nobody got any handouts. There’s no welfare, no nothing. You either worked and got it, or you didn’t have it. And of course, you didn’t have to be a technical worker. I mean, you can go, you know, clean the streets and make money. Or you can go shine shoes if you had to. Or, or run groceries or cuttin’ lawns or whatever. You’d do anything to survive. And there was no ha—well, you had to. There was no, no handouts.

MARY ANN: Right. Now you, you started earning money at a young age?

RALPH: Yeah.

MARY ANN: Work—do you, um—you did shoe shine, and worked in your dad’s store. And then, um, when, when you grew up, where did you work?

RALPH: Well I, mainly at the school. Probably, I went to GE, for just a few months. Then I joined the service, ’cause I got called.

MARY ANN: Was, and what . . . when were you in the service, what years?

RALPH: 1954 to 1958, ’57. Four years.

MARY ANN: And where did you go?

RALPH: Well, let’s see. I went to Basic right down here at Sampson, New York. Sampson Air Force Base. From there I went to Mississippi for radar school. From there I went to Korea for a year, and then from Korea I went to Japan for a year. And then I came back to Rome, [New York], where I met my wife, here, my significant half.

MARY ANN: And how did you and Dolores meet?

RALPH: Roller skating. I loved to roller skate and I, I was—I used to go out drinking too, like anybody else. You know, wild kid. But I used to go to the, uh—[*inaudible*]. I used to go to the, uh, uh . . . bars, okay? And but then, I’d—sometimes I’d end up, instead of doing that scene, I

liked to roller skate. As a matter of fact, in Japan I learned to ice skate. So that's similar, in a way. And they made me a pair of ice skates there, and I still have those ice skates.

Then, uh, in Mississippi—I'm backtracking, now, before I even went to Korea. I was walkin' along the street and I saw something green. I knew it was money in the gutter. So I just picked it up and put in my pocket, and I went back to the barracks. I looked at it. It was fifty dollars. In those days now, we're talking fifty do—tha' was good money. And so what I did, I put in another five dollars and bought Chicago velvet thread skates. And, uh, I still got them. And, uh, that was—

MARY ANN: Do you still skate?

RALPH: I would. I'd love to. But we don't go very often. I'd love to.

DOLORES: When the kids were little, we used to go.

RALPH: Yeah, but we don't go nearly anymore. But I would like to. I could still skate.

MARY ANN: And you bought those skates?

RALPH: I bought them. That was a lot of money in those days. Those were professional skates then, you know? And at any rate, now we'll go back to where we were. We're talking about the—where I went from. I met her roller skating. 'Cause, by then I knew how to skate pretty good. And, uh, I, I guess I musta fell down and she, she musta came and said, "Here's a guy." She cau—she chased me till I fell, I guess. And then that's how she hooked me, I imagine. *[laughs]* Of course she has a different story. But we won't let her tell that.

MARY ANN: Well, and it, and it obviously, it worked out really well for both of you.

RALPH: [Oh, yeah. Yep. Long time.

MARY ANN: What, what did you do in, um, in Korea?

RALPH: Well, uh, I maintained our group. We maintained the radar for, um, we—it's what's called ground-control approach. In other words, when the weather gets so bad, you can't even see, then the operators of the radar would talk the pilot down. He'd actually tell 'em, "You're two foot above the ground. You're, you're"—first of all, he'd tell you, "Make sure you're on track, and you're on the runway." And as you're coming in, they could tell by looking at it, they'd talk 'im down. How to get him down. My job, and my group's job was, if these things failed, these radars, we would repair 'em. It's like repairing a radio or something. And somebody else can operate it but, if it breaks down, you got somebody to repair it. That was my job.

MARY ANN: Well it sounds to me like you've had a wonderful career and many wonderful experiences, and, uh, I'm gonna ask—I wanna close with one more question. If you had a wish for the West Side, what would it be?

RALPH: I would wish that the technology we have now would remain 'cause you have a lot of better things going. But I wish the ways of the old days were back. In other words, where people cared about other people, and even about their own dignity. And, uh, obviously this would exclude things that we have now with all this, you know, family battering, and, uh, drugs, and alcoholism. We had people that—even in those days, that mighta got drunk. But I didn't recall anybody ever making that a big issue. It happened. Obviously. Always has, always will. So I would care for the technology of today for better things, you know, whether it's a washing machine or whatever. I don't want to see the hand scrubbing coming back again. But I would like the dignity of the generations handed down to us by our fathers. I think that's about all I would wish.

MARY ANN: Thank you very much, Ralph.

RALPH: You're welcome.

MARY ANN: It's been—it was a wonderful interview and, Dolores, thank you so much—

DOLORES: Okay.

MARY ANN: —for, um, your patience [*laughs*] during this fine process and listening to this. And, uh, we'll talk to you again someday soon.

RALPH: Okay. Thank ya.

MARY ANN: Alright. Bye-bye.

RALPH: Bye-bye.

[*end of interview*]