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West Side Oral Narrative Project

Transcribing Discourse and Diversity in
Saratoga Springs, New York

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***WEST SIDE ORAL NARRATIVE PROJECT:
TRANSCRIBING DISCOURSE AND DIVERSITY
IN SARATOGA SPRINGS, NEW YORK***

Eugene J. “Gene” Corsale

An Oral Narrative Recorded by Leona Casey Signor

June 3, 1999

Overview

Eugene J. “Gene” Corsale (1928-2014) grew up in an Italian-American “railroad family” rooted on the West Side of Saratoga Springs. Like other family members, Gene spent his early years working on upstate New York railroads, except for the period he served in the US Navy during the Korean War. Gene’s stories reveal the grandeur and admiration of locomotive technology, along with dangers that resulted in deadly crashes and scarred communities. Gene recounts the heyday and decline of the railroads, railroad work as a teenager on the home front during World War II, and the importance of the railroad for transporting military troops, tourists, and horses. His account touches on changing aspects of West Side life, including neighborhood closeness, conversations from porches, walks to the former high school, and alley shortcuts. Gene also describes his family’s connections to the railroad-crossing shanty that serves as a memorial to railroad workers of Saratoga Springs. [*Interview duration: 00:39:43*]

Key words: railroad work, train accidents, railroad-crossing shanties, Italian-Americans, World War II

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PREFACE TO THE ANNOTATED TRANSCRIPTS

**West Side Oral Narrative Project (WSONP):
Transcribing Discourse and Diversity in Saratoga Springs, New York**

You have to visualize these places 'cause it's long gone now.
—Edward Smith oral narrative, May 1, 1999

The West Side Oral Narrative Project (WSONP) began in 1998 as a community volunteer initiative to document oral heritage shared by long-term residents of neighborhoods on the west side of Saratoga Springs, New York. Recorded on tape cassettes, the interviews of over 60 residents encompass experiences of ethnically diverse, working-class, and immigrant families living on the city's West Side. Covering events since the early 1900s, the narratives reveal how Irish immigrants, African-American migrants from the South, and Italian immigrants contributed to the social and economic development of the City of Saratoga Springs.

Interviewees comment on a wide range of community activities, including family life, religious celebrations, schools, railroad transportation, the tourist industry, family-run restaurants and other businesses, sports and games, gardening and cooking, gambling, and entertainment in a sporting or red-light district. Residents also comment on the decline of the West Side due to economic downturns, the departure of younger generations, and the displacement of residents due to Urban Renewal and community development. The collection of audio recordings represents a delightful way to imagine the experiences of hard-working and creative families from the African-American neighborhood of Congress Street, and the Irish-American and Italian-American neighborhood nicknamed Dublin that was concentrated along Beekman Street.

Since 2011, faculty and students from the Department of Anthropology at Skidmore College have collaborated with the WSONP to help preserve and present local heritage. We digitized the original set of cassette tape recordings and created oral history transcripts for the Saratoga Springs Public Library. The WSONP collection of audio recordings, oral history transcripts, documents, and memorabilia are available at the library's Saratoga Room. Audio recordings and oral history transcripts are also available online: https://www.sspl.org/research/local_history/.

With guidance from the Lucy Scribner Library at Skidmore College, anthropology faculty and students created this series of annotated transcripts titled *West Side Oral Narrative Project: Transcribing Discourse and Diversity*. An accompanying *Transcription Style Guide* describes editorial considerations for producing the annotated transcripts. The series and style guide allow faculty and students to develop new projects and broadly share local culture and heritage.

We encourage others to accept Edward Smith's invitation to visualize people and activities that have long gone. The voices, stories, and laughter within each interview connect us with special people who created a meaningful, and often overlooked, part of Saratoga Springs heritage.

Professor Michael C. Ennis-McMillan
Department of Anthropology, Skidmore College
November 9, 2020

Eugene J. "Gene" Corsale
An Oral Narrative Recorded by Leona Casey Signor
June 3, 1999

LEE: Good afternoon. This is June third, and I'm interviewing Eugene Corsale for, um, his family history related to—relating to the railroad.¹

GENE: Thank you Lee. Uh, I come from a long line of railroad people. My father and my relatives were all railroad people. Uh, my older brother Denny is the oldest Amtrak conductor in the United States, and my younger brother Joe is still a conductor on the railroad in freight operations between Albany and Canada.

My father was foreman in a place called Chateaugay, which is up towards Lyon Mountain, up towards Plattsburgh. And, uh, originally, we were from Glens Falls and Fort Edward area, and he transferred down into Saratoga Springs to take a job, and his maintenance of way section was from, uh, Congress Avenue to Ballston Spa down behind the old tannery building.² Uh, from that job, he, uh—when upon the retirement of Joseph DiRienzo, who was the yard foreman, my father bid in on that job and he became Saratoga yard foreman. It was in charge of all the railroad tracks between Congress Avenue and what we used to call Maple Avenue, in those days, and all the crossin' watchmen that were involved there, and all the maintenance of way people.

Uh, myself, I began my railroad career in summer vacations during the war, World War II. And uh, there wasn't many, uh, elderly people around. They were all in the service. So basically, they hired a lot of us sixteen-year-olds and we worked Saturday and Sunday on the, the tracks, maintainin' 'em between Saratoga and Ballston and Ballston Lake.

Upon my graduation in 1946, I became a railroad fireman, firin' the steam locomotives, shoveling coal. Uh, I worked out of Saratoga, and I worked out of Mechanicville and I worked out of North Creek.³ Uh, after that, uh, due to a downsizin' in the employees, I took a job as a

¹ Gene Corsale prepared written comments to read during portions of the interview, so his remarks are more extensive than are other interviewees in the collection. An experienced storyteller, Gene wrote monthly articles in "Poor Richard's Saratoga Journal" and other local publications, and he conducted history tours. His obituary describes work on the Delaware & Hudson Railway, service in the US Navy, and his extensive community activities (*Source*: "Eugene Corsale Obituary," *Legacy.com*, 2014. Online: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/eugene-corsale-obituary?pid=170239488>). After his death, Gene was honored by the Preservation Foundation for his historic preservation work, especially with the Putnam Burying Ground, located on the West Side on South Franklin Street (*Source*: "Memorial Tree Dedication in Honor of Eugene Corsale," Saratoga Preservation Foundation, press release, October 12, 2016. Online: <https://www.saratogapreservation.org/media-advisory-memorial-tree-dedication-in-honor-of-eugene-corsale/>).

² Gene refers to the railroad occupation maintenance of way, which he pronounces as "maintenance away". We have used the formal spelling since this is a specific type of railroad occupation (*Source*: Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division-International Brotherhood of Teamsters, 2015. Online: <https://www.bmwe.org/default.aspx>).

³ The train station in the hamlet of North Creek (here pronounced /krik/) was the original terminus of the Adirondack Railway, the first in the region. The section between Saratoga and North Creek ceased

maintenance of way worker and became an assistant section foreman, and I worked, uh, in North Creek, and I worked on the Ballston Village relocation of, uh, the railroad tracks there in the 1949 and 50s.

Uh, after that I went into the Korean, uh, War area—went into the Navy for four years. And we enlisted, four—five of us people from the west side of town: Joe DeVivo, Willie Napolitano, Tony Sansiveri, Lou Alonzo, and myself. We all enlisted in the United States Navy. This is back in 1950 for a four-year enlistment.

LEE: That was the Korean War?

GENE: Yeah. So, um, we went away for four years, and, uh, we saw quite a bit of the world. And we also were involved in the Korean War.

Um, I remember fondly my experiences on the railroad, especially working with some of the ole Italian, uh, foremen and like that. We had one foreman out of Ballston Spa, a gentleman by the name of, uh, Frank Parrillo, and, uh, he really used to—we were kids making a man’s wages, but, uh, he used to treat us like men.

One of his favorite sayin’s were, “Boys, just because you bring your lunch, don’t think you’re on a picnic.”⁴ Another one that he used to always throw at us all the time, “If you don’t like it here, boys, the draft board, she’s open.” Which meant go down an enlist in the service, and that wasn’t on our mind, way back then.

But in any event, we had to work right along with the older folks, and, uh, there was no, uh, favoritism shown bein’ that we were just kids. We earned a man’s wages, like I said, and we, we put in a day’s work right along with everybody else.

So basically, I remember the railroad tracks on the west side of town. Uh, they ran up Franklin Street right through the streets. And, uh, they had maybe, uh, two—only two crosses that had flashing red lights, and the rest of the crossin’s were unprotected. But we never seemed to have an accident between a pedestrian or a, or a motor vehicle in all that area. And a lotta times as they were leavin’ the city, they would be going pretty fast by time they got up towards Church Street.⁵ But, um, everybody knew that there was trains there, and they knew that they hadda be safe. And there was never any accidents that I can recollect.

operation in 2018 and is designated as a heritage railway (*Source*: Protect the Adirondacks, 2019. Online: <https://www.protectadks.org/new-developments-on-the-fates-of-defunct-rail-lines-in-the-central-adirondacks-protect-calls-for-abandonment/>).

⁴ We use an apostrophe for contractions with a plural, which should not be confused with a possessive form. Sayin’ [sā-in/] is a contraction of saying [sā-ij/], and sayin’s is a contraction of sayings (rather than sayins). Similarly, crossin’ [krō-sin/] is a contraction of crossing [krō-sij/], and crossin’s is a contraction of crossings (rather than crossins).

⁵ We hear “by time” which may be a contraction of “by the time”.

Um, all the crossin's through the city of Saratoga Springs had crossin' watchmans on them twenty-four hours a day.⁶ So if you were walkin' between Broadway and, uh, let's say the west side of town, you always hadda cross over Washington Street, and there was the watchman there that you, you acknowledged him and he acknowledged you as you went by, maybe two, three in the morning, as you were coming home from a night of being on the town. Uh, it was a very nice neighborhood, uh, um, situation in that there was always somebody there midway between Broadway and the west side of town.

I remember the old fellas that I worked with. Joe Izzo who was a foreman on the Adirondack branch, which ran between Saratoga an Greenfield. And Joe DiRienzo, who was [*cough*] the boss of the Saratoga Yard before my father.⁷ I remember Angelo Scarfoale, who was my father's assistant foreman, and Tony Banjo, and Frank San Felice. They were quite a group of people to work with, and I believe that you could easily say that they were the last of the, uh, the manual workin' laborers that you had in America before automation came in like that—everything was done with a shovel an a pick. So we hadda lotta fun workin' with those fellas. And like I say, they didn't show us any favoritism because, uh, we were children or young people.

Uh, after the war in 1946, of course, all the fellas came home from the service and they all went to work on the railroad. The railroad was a big employer. Uh, we had people at the roundhouse. We had people in the railroad yards. There was a switch engine on duty around the clock between West Circular Street 'n Congress Avenue. You often wonder how the people slept. But it didn't bother 'em 'cause the trains were goin' through and switchin', and people just, uh, learned to, to live with 'em.

But, uh, it was really somethin' workin' with the fellas that came back from World War II because they hadda lotta stories to tell us, and of course we idolized those people. I can remember Carmen Dominick and Nickie Izzo, and Frankie Izzo, and, uh, the Parisi fellas.

So we really were in a nice environment as young people growin' up with these fellas who had a lotta stories to tell us, and, uh, it was, it was quite a, quite a situation workin' with 'em.

Um . . . [*shuffles pages*] There was plenty of work for everybody in the city because the railroad was one of the bigger employers. Um, they had, uh, all kinds of employment around. And if you wanted to work on your, on the weekends—and everybody was workin' Saturday and Sundays in those days. Wasn't much of a 40 hour week situation or anything like that. The railroads did, uh, work on a Saturday, at least the maintenance of way people. Then of course, in later years they got unionized and, uh, the 40 hours, uh, came into effect. There was only a five-day workweek.

But, uh, we used to, we really use to have a lotta fun, uh, with the railroad people and watchin' the trains come in in the summertime. There'd be one passenger train after another with the

⁶ Gene uses "watchman" to refer to the position, and he makes this plural by adding an "s" as "watchmans" rather than "watchmen". We used the spelling that came closest to his words.

⁷ Information on the Saratoga Yard is available from the Department of Transportation (*Source*: "Ballston Spa Second Main Track", New York State, Department of Transportation. Online: <https://www.dot.ny.gov/ballstonspasecondmaintrack>).

racetrack crowd and like that. Uh, 'nother thing they used to do, they'd bring in horse trains, and they'd unload the horses on West Circular Street. And if you wanted to, you could lead a horse over to the racetrack for whatever they paid. I forget what it was in those days, not too much anyhow.

Then I remember the iron ore trains coming down from North Creek through the streets. Uh, it was really a sight because they were long trains. They were heavy trains. And of course as the fella—as the engineer came down from Greenfield, if he didn't have his train under control by time it came down through the streets, we'd have a big problem. But they were all good engineers, and they all had their trains under control by time they came down through the streets, so they had a safe operation through the streets.

Um Prior to goin' in the Navy in 1949, I went down to Ballston. Took a job down there as assistant foreman on the railroad relocation, when the railroad was relocated from the village out into the outskirts where it is now. We eliminated all the railroad crossin's in Ballston. I remember working on the Kaydeross High Bridge. Um, we worked on there for months on end, and, uh, lotta children had been hurt up there. They'd go trespass up there and they've been hurt. And we were the fellas that laid the rails on those bridges in 1950 and '49. Uh, you often wonder how'd they get up there at such a high point that, even to this day, I don't think I'd go back up there again, uh, at the height of it.

But in any event, um . . . uh—'nother thing I remember is the freight house at West Circular Street. Uh, they'd bring in box cars there, and they'd unload various appliances—refrigerators, and like that—right at the freight house. Mr. Signor was in charge at the freight house then and, uh, a fella by the name of Pinto I remember workin' there. And, uh, they used to unload the less than carload lots, like the, the small crates that would come in to various people in the city. Uh, that was another busy area.

'Nother thing in those days, uh, as young people we very rarely said to anybody that was older than us—call them by their first name. Boy, everything was mister. "Mr. Signor, Mr. Mackinaw"—he was the track supervisor and like that. Everything was a mister. You never called anybody Pete, Joe, or anythin' like that if they were older than you.

Um Another thing I remember is in those days, um, most people, uh, had heat in their house either by wood, oil, or kerosene. And a lotta people that were poor would go down to the railroad yards and they'd collect coal in a bucket and bring it home for their stoves.

One person, Charlie Harrington, I still remember his name. He was in my, uh, I think fourth grade class, and he was down there with his family picking coal up from arou—that had fallen off the coal cars and like that. And there was a group of cars settin' still on a track, and Charlie reached in to get a piece a coal near a wheel, and the train started up and took Charlie's arm off. So we did have a really, a lotta, a tough situations in those days. Charlie, I see him today, and uh, uh, it's unfortunate he went through life due to that accident of tryin' to pick up coal to heat his home and help his family out.

Uh, we did have a lotta poverty in those days, also. Now today, ya got welfare and like that, where people are taken care of. In those days, if ya couldn’t make it on your own, you were almost outta luck.

Um Another thing I remember is the snowplow up to—that left Saratoga and, and went up to the mines at Tahawus, which has, uh, the end of the line up there. You’re at the foot of Mount Marcy.⁸ And, uh, it’s really an awesome sight when you see Mount, Mount Marcy right from the, uh, the end of the railroad line an like that. It’s quite a spectacular view bein’ it’s the highest point in New York State.

But I used to go up on a plow and I was workin’ for Joe Izzo at that time. And I’d go up with Joe Izzo and Frank San Felice and a fella by the name a Walt Chambers, and we’d plow the railroad tracks all the way between Saratoga and North Creek and on into the mines. So it was quite a day for a young guy, and I was making the same amount of money as the, the older men were. So—

LEE: What, what was the mines?

GENE: The iron ore mines up at Tahawus, New York. So we—I used to—I was like the handyman on there, and I would ride with these older fellas and like that. And we’d plow the tracks out—all the way after a big snowstorm—all the way up to the mines, about a ninety-mile run. Uh, sometimes we’d stay overnight in North Creek, which was a big deal for me as a young guy and like that. But they always treated ya nice, the older, the older fellas and like that. And you’d learn from them. You’d learn respect. You learned hard work. And those, uh, those assets never leave ya, even to this day.

I also remember a long time ago, uh, 1940. Company L was going away to train, uh, down in Alabama. And all the soldiers, uh—we had a big party when they left the army. They marched from the armory up, uh, Lake Avenue right to the railroad station. They had a band and everything. And purt near the whole city turned out for that.⁹ Well the local soldiers hadda go over on what they called track three and load onto the passenger cars. They were waitin’ for a train to come down from the north, come down from Fort Edward, where upon they’d hook these cars up in Saratoga. And they’d go down to New York.

Well, some—something happened. A freight train got through. There was a n—northbound freight train. And he got through the railroad yards, and came right into the crowd and killed two girls. It was almost like, so called like the Titanic, a night to remember. It was just pandemonium. The engineer on—uh, ironically enough, his name was Farone, which we have a big family in Saratoga by that name, Farone. So he—he wasn’t told to stop and the signals weren’t set for him to stop. It was just a human error. And he came into that crowd. The crowd

⁸ Tahawus, now vacant, was the site of major mining and iron smelting operations in the 19th and 20th centuries (*Source*: Michael Virtanen, “Digging into Tahawus mine.” *Adirondack Explorer*, June 26, 2018. Online: <https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/stories/digging-into-tahawus-mine>).

⁹ This is a regional variation of “pretty near it”, meaning nearly and almost. *Source*: “Pretty.” In *Dictionary of American Regional English*, Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall, editors, Volume IV, page 344. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985-2012.

was between the railroad station and the car saying goodbye to the soldiers. And the train just plowed right in, into them. Lotta people got injured, and it's a wonder more people didn't, uh, get killed. But unfortunately, two, uh, high school girls did get killed.¹⁰

LEE: Do you remember their names?

GENE: Their names was Lois Mosher and a McNeil girl. And, um, it was quite a, quite an evening and like that. Myself, I was up there—in fact, everybody's family was up there 'cause we all had relatives that were in the, the National Guard and like that. Uh, I was by myself and I think I was maybe about, uh, eleven, twelve years old, and my, my sister was with my father and mother. And my two older brothers were off by themselves. But I saw the train comin' and I says, "He's not gonna stop."

And what I did, I went—there was a big water fountain there, a water spout where they used to, uh, water up the engines right at Division Street. And I jumped on that and held on to the spout, figurin' the train can't come over on that spout and hit me. So the engine went right by me. But the thing is, uh, it—it was, it was quite a night and, uh, we're lucky that there wasn't a lot more fatalities.

Uh, unfortunately, you have to remember, uh, the traumatic experience of that engineer, because that was his run. And, uh, for years thereafter he always hadda come by that, that spot, because he ran between Oneonta and Whitehall. His name was um . . . uh, Lo—I think, Lou Farone or something like that. But in any event, could you imagine the experience of havin' to run over that same route every night? I mean, he couldn't take a detour. It isn't like you're operating an automobile. That was his job. And for years thereafter, he came through Saratoga, 'cause we all knew him. He had a special way of blowin' his whistle. You could tell it was him. You could—when the locomotives blew their whistle at Congress Avenue, you could say, "Well, that's Freddy Ferro"—I forget his name. Fred—maybe, "Freddy Farone, the engineer." You can always hear the way they blew their whistle, you know? So in any event, that really had to be a tough experience on that engineer and his life, his workin' life.

LEE: Now, um, whereabouts—whereabouts is this? Is this where the old, um, Price Chopper—

GENE: Where the Price Chopper is right now. The older one. Yeah, that was the railroad station. In other words, uh, right directly opposite, uh, the County building. You know where the County building—

LEE: Right.

¹⁰ Local accounts describe the train crash and identify the train engineer as Anthony Farone (*Sources*: Paul Post. 2013. "Veteran's story — William 'Red' Main recalls horrific experience on a troop train in Saratoga Springs." *The Saratogian*, November 9, 2013. Online: https://www.saratogian.com/news/veteran-s-story-william-red-main-recalls-horrific-experienc-on-a-troop-train-in-saratoga/article_317c693d-1fbd-5c0a-aa69-2e06a6567340.html); The New York State Military Museum and Research Center. Online: <https://dmna.ny.gov/historic/>).

GENE: That right there is where the engine stopped. So by time he got up there, he'd—he made a terrific stop, the engineer—but by time he got up there, he had hurt a lot of people, injured a lot of people. And, uh, the train had killed, uh, two girls. So that was really a bad night.

In the meantime, the soldiers, they couldn't dispatch 'em to Albany. They just let 'em stay in the railroad yards at West Circular Street until they found out who was killed, so the soldiers would know that any of their relatives were either hurt or okay. But it was, uh, uh, really a night that, uh, nobody forgets from that area. At least I didn't forget because I was all by myself. Then my father went panicky lookin' for me, and uh—

LEE: I heard of that story when I came to Saratoga. Company L, uh—Grace Luciano was hurt.

GENE: Yeah. A lotta people were hurt. And, uh, we're really fortunate because the crowd was caught between the parked railroad cars and the railroad station. And it only had one door to get in the railroad station. In other words, the doors that were right behind you weren't open. They were never open. You always went out through the side door to get on a train. So the people were wedged right in there. So we're very, very fortunate that, uh, a lotta people, a lot more people didn't get injured.

But, um, I can remember being a railroad fireman and like that. And if, if I'd a—would've lasted it, uh, I woulda been all set because the diesels came in shortly after I went on to the, the maintenance of way gang. And, uh, everybody kinda threw away their coal shovels, and, uh, they had a pretty easy job bein' a fireman on a diesel locomotive.

But ridin' on locomotives—especially the steam locomotives—was quite a thrill to a young guy because you had perhaps the biggest piece of machinery, moving machinery on Earth. And you were part of it, keepin' it going. So it was quite interesting and like that. And I liked it, and, uh, I think, uh, um, if the railroad didn't downsize at that time, they were one of the first corporations to, to downsize. Now today it's a common practice in 1999, downsizin' of corporations. The railroad was the first one to do it.

And a big problem, uh, that came around was mainly union—unionization. Before unions the railroads were almost, uh—at least the construction gang was a six-day operation and transportation was like it is now, seven-day operation right around the clock. But they started cuttin' people off. And that right there was really the way—put the railroads in the situation that they are today. They're tryin' to come back. But they were at the peak of their, their excellence in the fifties and the sixties, the railroads. Of course—

LEE: That's when they started to dwindle down?

GENE: That's right. About the sixties. The sixties, they started doin' away with passenger trains. We used to have a lotta passenger trains comin' into the city. In the sixties, they started doin' away with it.¹¹ Then eventually they relocated the railroad from the city out into the country out to West Avenue, where it is now. And they did away with all the railroad crossin's. Now we had

¹¹ This is the same period that the automobile became more common and the New York Thruway and Northway were built, which also lessened the demand for passenger train transportation.

railroad crossin's at, uh, the Geyser down by SPAC and we had it at Congress Avenue. We had it at, uh, West Circular Street. We had it at, um, uh, Ash Street. We had it at Washington, Division, Church, Walton, Woodlawn, Broadway, and North Broadway. And they were all staffed around the clock, three men to a watchman shanty.

A lotta times they would let us, uh, high school guys work as crossin' watchmans on the weekend, which brought a little bitta money in.

Another thing in those days, you'd turn the money into your mother and father. You paid—you helped run the family. You didn't, uh, make all that money and figure you were gonna buy a car or somethin'.

Uh, 'nother thing too, in my time when I came out of the service in 19—when I came out of high school in 1946, goin' to college was unheard of. There was no such thing as student aid or your parents havin' enough money to send you to college. You came from a family of five children, you weren't gonna go to—go to any college. You graduated, had your party that night, and the next day, I was on the railroad. Course I wanted to go on the railroad anyhow, because I came from a railroad family.

But my father's philosophy—God rest his soul—was that he would send everybody to school. A lotta the fellas that I went to grammar school with hadda quit school at sixteen to help, uh, support their family. But my father said, "You'll all go to high school, and at least you'll have that under your, uh, under your sk—uh, head," so to speak. But the, the whole thing is—in those days, a high school education was very valuable. Today, it's almost like a, an intermediate situation and you really don't learn—I, I don't think as much as we learned in high school, or we learned in grammar school. So it was quite a thing, uh, as far as havin' a high school education. Nowadays, if you don't have a college education, you can't even go for an interview. They want college diplomas and like that.

But in any event—

[*pause in recording*]

GENE: Another thing we used to have to do as high school students, we hadda walk all the way from the west side of town over to Lake Avenue, where the present elementary school is. And we hadda walk to school, and we hadda come home for lunch. We got outta school at towards twelve o'clock. We hadda rush all the way home. And we hadda eat lunch, which our mothers had ready for us the minute we came in the door. And we'd walk all the way back to high school and have to be back there by one o'clock—rain, snow, sleet, or hail. It didn't make any difference. In those days, if you had a snowstorm, there was no such thing as a snow day. You just took the day off. We went to school the whole amount of days that it was scheduled. There was no such thing as, "Bad weather, you don't go to school."

I often think about today how the girls managed, uh, to get back and forth with subzero weather, and they didn't have any slacks. Slacks weren't heard—weren't heard of in those days. And

slacks weren’t worn by a woman in those days. So those girls hadda go back and forth across town in skirts, which must have been cold.

One thing we used to do, we all used to try to buy ski boots ’cause ski boot was the most—best thing to have on your foot in bad weather, in winter weather. So we all wanted, uh, a pair of ski boots, which were pretty heavy to lug back an forth across town. But if you had a bicycle, you usually had somebody ridin’ home with ya at noon hour on the crossbars. Uh, so you more or less, uh, made it useful for both a yuhs.¹² If you had a bicycle, it was almost like havin’ a car.

Course, in those days, they were—they were the war years, so there was no such thing as, uh, havin’ a pleasure automobile. All the gas was rationed, and automobiles weren’t bein’ made. Uh, I can remember Morris Figelman and his father owned Figelman’s Junkyard.¹³ And they brought a car in that they were gonna scrap. Well they managed to get it runnin’, and Morris got himself a license. We were about third year high school, juniors. He got himself a license, ’n bein’ that I was best friends with Morris, him and I rode in the car back and forth to high school. Um, needless to say that Morris was the most popular guy in high school. I was the second most popular guy because I was Morris’s friend and I had the front seat of the car.

LEE: [*laughs*]

GENE: So we had all kinds of women—girls ridin’ back ’n forth with us downtown an like that. Well, the car only lasted about four or five months, and then it fell apart and it was scrapped. Needless to say, when Morris lost his automobile, nobody knew ’im and nobody knew me [*laughs*].

LEE: [*laughs*]

GENE: We, we, we were—we were not kingpins anymore. We didn’t have any automobile anymore. So then we went back to our bicycles. [*laughs*]

But, um, it was certainly an interesting situation. Then all of a sudden when you’re walkin’ back home—uh, walkin’ back to the school—you hadda be there at one o’clock. There was no such thing as, “I, I, uh, I left the house late,” or something like that—you hadda be back or you were

¹² We used ‘yuhs’ /jəz/ is a regional variation of youse for a second person plural pronoun. We use ‘ya’ /jə/ as an unstressed variation of ‘you’ for a second person singular pronoun. *Source*: “Youse.” In *Dictionary of American Regional English*, Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall, editors, Volume V, page 1131. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985-2012.

¹³ I. Figelman & Son Scrap Metal Dealers was located at 77 South Franklin Street, on the southwest corner of Grand Avenue and South Franklin Street. The business was sold in 2012 (*Source*: “Spa City Recycling Handles Scrap Metal from Homeowners and Big Businesses,” *Saratoga Business Journal*, May 7, 2013. Online: <https://www.saratoga.com/saratogabusinessjournal/2013/05/spa-city-recycling-handles-scrap-metal/>). Figelman family history also provides information on the scrap yard (*Sources*: “Morris Figelman Obituary,” *Legacy.com*, 2013. Online: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/saratogian/obituary.aspx?n=morris-figelman&pid=167168737&fhid=28882>; “Solomon Figelman Obituary,” *Compassionate Funeral Care*, 2015. Online: <https://www.compassionatefuneralcare.com/obituary/Solomon-Figelman>).

marked tardy. So if a freight train was comin' through, you were held up. I mean, the freight train was going through, and they went through pretty slow. The gates were down, so you hadda wait. We all used to run down to Congress Street to go underneath the bridge, and, and uh, get onto the other—get onto Broadway and the east side of town and that way, so we wouldn't be late for school.

So we had a lot of responsibility as school students, and we more or less took care of that responsibility or else you heard from the school authorities. And then if that wasn't enough, if your father found out about it, you heard from him too. So you just didn't do it, and you did everything you were supposed to do. You followed orders. Um, there w—there wasn't any second chances, or anything like that. But—

LEE: Do you still have your high school diploma?

GENE: Probably.

LEE: Would you try to find it?

GENE: Yeah. I don't think you'd want my report card. [*laughs*]

LEE: [*inaudible*]

GENE: [*laughs*] I do have the report card. But that right there are some of the things that I remember, uh, about goin' back 'n forth across town to school.

And, uh, I can remember the, the trains goin' through durin' the war. We used to see a lot of tanks and war material goin' north to Canada. And once in a while you'd see troop trains going through and like that.

But it was quite an experience growing up in those days. Uh, the country was at war, but everybody seemed to be more together, helpin' one another, likin' one another. And they had a lot in common in that everybody had somebody in the service. Uh, every family was touched by it.

So, uh—course when the, the men would come home on leave on a weekends and like that, that was a big occasions, 'cause everybody'd wanna know where they'd been and what they did and so on, so forth.¹⁴ So it was quite a, um, a time to be, uh, a young fella in and like that. Because there was an awful lot going on.

Course, the, the flip side of that, there was a awful lotta sorrow too because people—the fellas got killed in the war, and they got wounded in the war. And when that happened, the whole neighborhood felt bad.

LEE: I'm told that, that the West Side really gave a lot to the war effort. [*inaudible*].

¹⁴ "Weekends" is the same convention as "watchmans" described in footnote 6.

GENE: Oh yeah, we did. Every family did. An in fact on the St. Peter's, uh, uh, War Memorial that we're, uh, refurbishing now—restorin' it—uh, there's eighteen people from the parish that made the supreme sacrifice in World War II, and eleven of those fellas are from the West Side.¹⁵

LEE: Eleven.

GENE: And I knew a lot of 'em myself as a kid, as a young fella. Out of the eighteen people listed on the war memorial at St. Peter's on Broadway, eleven of those, uh, men are from the West Side neighborhood.

So we did do quite a bit in the war as did everybody else. It was a, uh, years of, uh, sorrow and not much in the way of happiness, unless, you know, somebody came home all in one piece and like that, without any injuries. But, uh, everybody was, was united in a common effort and everybody, uh, was *very* much into their religion. They had novenas that my mother went to—God rest her soul—purt near every night in a week, uh, prayin' for the service men and like that.¹⁶

So it was a great time to live in, and at the same time, it was a, a sorrowful time to live in. But we all got through the war, and, uh, like I say, uh, I think everybody was better for it.

But I did have occasion to work with, like I say, a lot of great people on the railroad. They were comical. They were funny. They'd like to gamble. They'd like to drink. And, uh, the thing is, they worked hard. You had to work hard, or else. There wasn't any situation of sayin', "I don't feel good today." A lotta times, when we were working—we used to work Saturdays and Sundays, uh, because there was nobody around. I mean, uh, everybody was into the war effort as a soldier or sailor or whatever. So we used to work Saturdays and Sundays. And, uh, after a particularly tough day when we'd disband at the, the tool shanty, so to speak, somebody'd say, uh, "Are ya goin' down on Broadway tonight?" 'N everybody used to say—purt near everybody used say: "I'm going to bed." "I've had it." "I'm tired." "I gotta get ready for tomorrow," and like that.

But um, it was really interesting, and uh, at the same time, um—like I say, we learned somethin' from these older people. I feel I have because they were the last of what I call the great Americans. And they were great. The generation that fought the war and the generation that kept up the home front, meanin' their fathers. They're great people. An most of them were fr—were from the Dublin area.¹⁷

LEE: Now, what—what was the ethnic background that were there? All Italian?

¹⁵ This World War II memorial is located along Broadway, south of the Rectory of St. Peter's Catholic Church.

¹⁶ A traditional novena consists of songs, prayers, and a sermon. A rosary devotion might be recited as part of a novena service as well.

¹⁷ Dublin was the nickname of the Beekman Street area on the West Side, referring to the concentration of Irish immigrants in the late 1800s. The nickname continued even after Irish families moved and Italian immigrants became more numerous.

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GENE: All Italians. All Italians. All the Italians on the, on the west side of town were—I'd say, right, predominantly employed on the railroad. An right across the street from your house, Lee, lived Pete DellaValle. And I can remember Peter, he was a, a car man down in the railroad yard. I can remember Peter pickin' up a railroad tie—one that was, uh, you know, one that he would bring home to heat his home with—and puttin' it right on his shoulder. This is how strong these people were. A brand new tie that isn't water soaked or anything, it's sort of heavy, but not that heavy. But Peter—an older tie that had been pulled outta the track and replaced, an was available for disposal, that's pretty waterlogged, and it's been in the, the ground for a buncha years. Peter would put that on his shoulder an truck it all the way from West Circular Street right up here to Elm Street, for his house. And it was somethin' to see a man goin' down the street with a railroad tie. It usually'd took two men to lift it. An he would bring it home with 'im.

So we used to, we used to have like the coal chute down there. And a lot of people, like I say, when I told the story about Charlie Harrington, a lotta people would go down there and pick up coal and, uh, have it for their houses 'cause that was the main way ya heated yer house. There was no electricity—electric heat, and there was no gas heat. Everybody was on kerosene, coal, or wood. We burned wood in my house, and I can remember the chimney fires they used to call—cause, because it was Georgia pine. Pitch—in the la—the pitch in it 'n like that. The resin in it. It would always call you—eventually cause you a, a chimney fire. Now, ya never hear of a chimney fire unless it's somethin' by mistake. But in those they were—in those days, they were very predominant, chimney fires.

LEE: Now, did people have coal delivered to their homes?

GENE: Some used to. It all'd depend on, you know, how much your income was an like that. A lotta people would get the coal delivered to their home by the coal man. And there was a big coal company up on, uh, Church Street. Right across from Stewart's was, uh, Ashton Coal Company and—

LEE: Is that the same as Ashton Fuel?

GENE: Yeah.

LEE: The descendants?

GENE: They were originally the coal people. So in any event, a lotta people would get the coal delivered to them and the coal man'd have it in bags and he'd put the bag on his shoulder, truck it off the truck, and throw it down the shoot into your cellar. And that's the way people heated, with coal. And usually they had kerosene as an auxiliary heater upstairs or somethin' like that. That's why you got all those vents in your ceiling and your, your floor vents, so that the heat would travel upstairs. Um, the winters were pretty cold, but still in all those, those coal stoves, which were right in the center of yer kitchen would be red hot, because that was the way ya heated your house.

LEE: Because they didn't have radiators back then.

GENE: Didn't have any radiators or anythin' like that until, you know, later years, or unless you had—you were a little bit better well off, you know? But a lotta people would go down there 'n pick up coal, and in the case of Charlie Harrington, he unfortunately picked up, uh, went for—to reach for a piece of coal in between, uh, wheels on a car, 'n the train started up and caught his arm.

But, um, there were tremendous amount of people workin' on the railroad. It was the greatest employer in the city. But again, I wanna stress, Lee, that most of the people workin' on the railroad came from the west side of town. The transportation end of it was the people—lotta people from the fringes on the west side of town. But the Italian people, uh, my ancestors, my ethnic background, all went to work on the railroad when they came into Saratoga, and that's why they located here. And, uh, like I say, my family's been on the railroad since maybe a century, you might as well say. Uh, you'd figure way back into the 1910s. My grandfather was on the railroad, my father, my brothers, and myself. And, uh, like I say, uh, it's been, uh, a great employer and it brought up a lot of families.

LEE: Now, can you tell me about the shanty that you rededicated?

GENE: Okay. So when, uh, the railroad was disbanding through Saratoga and relocatin' on to West Avenue, a lotta these crossin' watchman shanties, some were in the air—they were elevated shanties—and some were on the ground. It was a one-man shanty. So my father bought one, and I'm pretty sure he—the one he got is from Woodlawn Avenue. But in any event, he had it brought home by Frank Brownell, who was a trucker in those days and one of our neighbors.¹⁸ And they put it in the backyard as a playhouse for us kids. An we used to go in there in wintertime 'cause my father also got a stove with it. And we'd make a fire in there an play games an play cards an just sit in there an while away the time. That was sort of like our playhouse.

So in any event, as we all grew older 'n moved away, the, the playhouse still stood there. And in the meantime, my brother'd got himself a German police dog, my brother Joe. And that was a dog house. So here's a German police dog's got his own house and a fenced in yard. But in any event, uh, the dog of course passed away an Joe was gonna build a, a garage in back of the house. So he didn't know what to do with the shanty. He was gonna demolish it. And then he got the idea that, "No. Maybe the city would want that as an historic building." Which it was—that was our railroad heritage, those watchman shanties.

So between Joe and Tommy McTygue—Tommy McTygue, the Commissioner of Public Works. His father was a railroad fireman, Charlie McTygue. So these two railroad families got together, and Tommy McTygue's people restored the shanty. And it sits on the same place where it came from, Woodlawn Avenue.

And ironically enough, when I was in high school, I used to have a job on the weekends as bein' crossin' watchman there, at that same shanty that's there right now. And, uh, we—we used to be fillers-in for when people went on vacation, uh—the regular men went on vacation. And, uh, my

¹⁸ Frank Brownell was a neighbor on Washington Street. All of the backyards connected between Walnut Street and Birch Street for those who lived on Grand Avenue, Walnut Street, and Washington Street.

father was a foreman, of course, and if he needed men, he'd say, "How 'bout you or your friends, you wanna work?" Said, "Sure." So we'd go over there an between gettin' out and flaggin' for the trains as they came by, we'd do our homework, right in the crossin' shanty.

So that crossin' shanty, thank God that it wasn't demolished. It's part of the City of Saratoga Springs. It's been fixed up nice inside. Tommy McTygue's people did a beautiful job. We've got a stove in there, a chair. We got some clothes. I'm gonna hang pictures in there. I've already donated two pictures of the old railroad station and a picture of a, uh, a grandfather of a fella who worked on the railroad in 1920 when he was a watchman at that shanty th—accompanied by the ole cars. So we're gonna, the—an old, uh, uh, Ford car. So we're hangin' that in the shanty, and little by little, we're addin' things like a coffee pot, a cup, spoon, and tryin' to make it so when you look in, you can—and it's got a plastic door, an you can look right in. So when you—and then nighttime, it's lit up. And you can look in and see what, you know, what they looked like years ago. It was a one-man shanty.

LEE: Explain where it is.

GENE: The shanty's at, uh, Woodlawn Avenue. That's right off in Church Street, right across the street in what they call Van Aller Park, uh, opposite Stewart's on Church Street.¹⁹

LEE: When was it dedicated?

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GENE: You can't miss it. It was dedicated about, uh, two years ago by Tom McTygue, and all the city officials were there. And all the people from the West Side were there. And, uh, we had a very nice dedication program. It was covered in the newspapers, and, uh, it gets, uh—it's dedicated to the, to the people that worked on the railroad in Saratoga Springs. And it sets on the site where the railroad tracks used to go by. The railroad tracks went right through Woodlawn Avenue, right through that area.

LEE: So it's the same site?

GENE: The same site. Where that—where that shanty came from.

LEE: What a wonderful donation to the city.

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GENE: It is. It was a terrific thought. And like I say, it was saved from the scrap heap. And you look at it today—they put a new roof on it, a new floor on it, painted it, refurbished it, and it really is exquisite. And of course, when I look in the window, I remember the book rack on the shelf made out of a box with a slot in the middle. I remember puttin' that up there, nailing it to the two-by-fours as a kid. It's still there. We saved that.

LEE: A wood [*inaudible*]?

¹⁹ The dedication of the railroad crossing shanty was featured in the *Saratogian* newspaper (*Source*: "Park to Mark Site of Historical Rail Crossing," *Saratogian*. March 27, 2005. Online: https://www.saratogian.com/news/park-to-mark-site-of-historical-rail-crossing/article_a7c133ee-0dfe-5b0d-a78c-8f853d6609d3.html).

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GENE: Yeah. It's a wood—it's a crate, a wood box. We nailed it to the wall so we could put things up there to store it and like that, you know. But, uh, it was quite a, quite a thing to keep in perpetuity. And, uh, everybody can enjoy it and look at it and read the sign. There's a nice sign there explaining what it was and why it was donated in, in memory of the railroad men that worked in the Saratoga Springs area, right up until the, the track was moved out into the country.

So it was quite an interesting side of town to live on. And, uh, you could, you could walk down through the streets at any time of the day or night, and there was always somebody on the porch sayin' hello to ya or acknowledgin' you're passin' by, and like that.

Today, a lot of people have—Lee, a lot of people have their porches ripped off. That's the worst thing you could do 'cause the porch was the meeting place when people were on foot. Now, of course, everybody's got a car, so they don't walk the sidewalks too much. But we were told as kids when we used to walk from our house down to Broadway and all the grownups were sittin' on their porches right along Washington Street that you had to say hello to all of 'em. And we used to say, "Why?" Well they said, "That's the way it's done." Well fortunately, we had a lotta alleys in back a the streets, and we used to take the alleyways just, just to get away from sayin' hello to these grownups. [*laughs*] You know, we, we'd run down the alleyways, and like that.

LEE: [*laughs*]

GENE: 'Cause that was the instructions from your parents, "You have to say hello to everybody that's out on their porch." Well, you say, "I'd rather take the alleyway." And luck would have it in Saratoga, we had a lotta alleyways, so we used to travel the alleyways.

LEE: That's wonderful what they do with the alleys, how they renamed 'em all.

GENE: Yeah, that was good. Uh, because I think one of the policeman was—had a call into the station. There was trouble. And he said—they said, "Where you at?" "Well," he says, "I'm on an alley off of Franklin Street or somethin'." They said, "Well, what alley?" He says, "There's no name to it." So now they named everythin' and they can better, you know, find where they're at.

But, um, working on the railroad was a good experience. And, um, it was dangerous work. It was hard work. It was heavy work. And it was dirty work. But yet, that's the—that's the kinda work that kept the trains moving and kept the trains on the track. So it was very, very important work.

Up in back of the ole Community Theater, where the firehouse restaurant is now, that was what they call an S curve up there. In other words, it went, went around like that, and it was a snake curve. They call it an S curve. And that's one of the worst kinds of pieces—worst types of pieces of track you could have. You like straight track or maybe a curved track, but not curved all that much. And that was like a blind curve in there. But we never had a derailment in there. And the trains used to whip right around there. By time a long freight came through when the caboose come through, they were, they were really flying, you know.

Unfortunately, two men went up there in the wintertime, two ra—trackmen went up there to clean out a couple switches. And they were up against a, a fence as the train went by. Unfortunately, the train derailed and . . . killed those two fellas in there. So after that—this was prior to my time on the railroad, but the old timers would say, "Under no circumstances, go up there and clean any switches unless somebody is down on the crossin' to warn ya that there's a train comin'." So we used to preach safety first quite a bit.

I can remember workin' out of, uh—in the railroad yards here. And, uh, we'd have, um, our lunch at Franklin Street where the railroad shanties were at for three different gangs. And, uh, at noon time we'd all go down to Patsy DeVivo's store, which was on the corner of, um, Beekman and, uh, Ash. And, uh, we'd go down there for our soda an goodies and like that. So it was quite an area to live in. And, uh, like I say, the people were very good, hard workin', law abiding, an took care of their families.

LEE: Well I thank you very, very much for this interview. This is wonderful.

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GENE: Did I—was that enough? *[laughs]*

[end of interview]