

Rachel Salvagio

**Interviewed August 8, 2007
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum**

Holli Connell: Could you please state your first and last name please.

Rachel Salvagio: My name is Rachel Salvagio. That is my married name, Salvagio. I was Rachel Lupo.

HC: Are you married?

RS: Widow.

HC: Do you have any children?

RS: Had two. One passed away many, many years ago and I have a son now.

HS: Educational background?

RS: High school and two years of college.

HS: And do you work now?

RS: I'm 85.

HC: Did you have past work?

RS: Yes, I was a bookkeeper for the Rockford Board of Education for many years.

HC: When did you come here?

RS: I was born in Rockford, raised in Rockford, have never left.

HC: Your parents then?

RS: My parents came here from Italy. They both went through Ellis Island and my mother came from, she went directly from Palermo to New York then she went from New York to Chicago. And my father went from New York to Louisiana because in those days somebody had to sponsor you and worry about whether you had food, there was no welfare somebody had to say yeah well, we'll feed her until she gets a job or whatever and in both cases my mother had a married sister here. My father had brothers that had come previously but they lived in Louisiana.

HC: Were your parents married before they came here?

RS: No.

HC: Deciding to come, what did your parents do before they came here?

RS: They were in Italy. My mother was in [Combourgeaille]. My father was in [Mondreaille]. Well, I know he did a lot of landscaping and garden work. I don't know enough more about my father. My mother was one of five sisters and each one of them had a job they had to do. They didn't go to work but there was the father and one of the daughters that took care of all the gardening in the fields for their food and there was the other one who did the cooking in the house and then another one would do some of the housework and things of that nature. I don't remember what the younger one did. My mother was second from the youngest. She was the seamstress and her responsibility was to take care of her father's clothes. She would sew his jackets and as a matter of fact when she came to the United States she went to work in that kind of a factory where they made men's clothing but my father, all we knew was that he did garden type work. My mother talked a lot. My father didn't. So we know more about my mother than we really know about my father except our life with him, nothing previous, see.

HC: What made them want to come here?

RS: Well, work. This I do know about my father, his brother sponsored him and said there is work here and besides that he had a strawberry farm that he could work in however, my father, I'll finish with him, he didn't like the strawberry farm so then he had a cousin who had been in Rockford for a long time and uncle Jack called him, wrote to him I can get you a job either in one of the factories or on the railroad if you want to come here. My father hightailed for Rockford and never left again. Corresponded with his brothers but never left Rockford.

My mother, her story is a little different. In Italy, the custom there was that of the five sisters they were to marry the oldest first, and you know down the line. Well, my mother still had two ahead of her and there was a suitor and of course they come and talked to the father and the father says oh no, no you want one of the other ones you can have one but not her yet. She is not of age yet. My mother kind of liked that man that's when she thought I'm not going to stand around and wait for somebody I don't like and that's when she corresponded with her sister and she promised her if she would send her the money and everything she would go to work and pay her which she did. So her sister sent her the fare but then she was only 14 1/2 years old. They could not come until they were, see I don't remember if it had to be 16 or 18. I don't remember what she said but she lied. She got the passport with the age that they told her. You know they didn't look for birth certificates or any of that sort of thing. Then there was the question of how or you can you go there. Women didn't travel alone but there was a man in the village who was a widower and he had a daughter the age, she was the right age as my mother and so he spoke to my grandfather and he said why don't I take her with me because I would like my daughter to have company. See the ships that they came in, they used to separate them. The men and women were not on the same level. They didn't have what we now have on our cruise ships and everything. No, they had like dormitories my mother would explain it and this was all women and men where ever up or down there were men and for that reason this man was worried about his daughter. So this made it real nice that there were the two women. They didn't see him very often as they crossed the Atlantic because the men were

always kept separate, see. And then she got here, she went through Ellis Island and in those days a few dollars you could buy almost anything. Well they use to strip these immigrants for a physical and this man says they're not going to do that to these two girls you know. He paid somebody off you know and they scooted them away and away they came they didn't have to strip. Oh yeah, all kinds of things happening. So she boarded in Palermo. She came to New York and then from New York she went directly to Chicago where her sister called for her was and then she found a job and she worked there and this one cousin that my mother had here in Rockford had been working with my father. He knew he was a young single man and my father was a good-looking man and he says I'm going in to go in to see my cousins, come with me and so he says okay and they went a couple of times and they treated him royally, like the Italian's always have a great big feast if somebody comes in that you haven't seen yesterday. And so he went two or three times and then Uncle Chris says, he says do you like Rosa? She's single. So little by little they maneuvered it somehow and my mother married him and then she married him and moved right to Rockford.

HC: What was the time frame that that marriage happened, that she met him?

RS: Do you mean between the time she arrived? Let's see, she got married in September. I believe they said it was around the holiday time, yeah. I think it was around the holiday time so it was not that long but you know in those days you had the recommendation from an older one and those fixed marriages, which lasted better than today's; you know were okay.

HC: You know how long, you were going to answer it but I asked it a different way, but how long from when she came to the United States until she got married?

RS: Three years I believe she said.

HC: Now did her father approve the marriage because at her leaving were her older sisters married yet?

RS: Yeah, but see this was not in their country. This was here and he didn't, two things he wasn't sure what the custom was here and the other thing his older daughter that was here said it's okay, that kind of thing.

HC: About what year was that that they were married?

RS: Probably 1915-1916.

HC: And they came over?

RS: Yeah, that my mother did. My father, I'm not really sure like I said mom talked all the time. My father went to work he says I don't have time to talk.

HC: But you would probably think before her?

RS: Oh yeah he did come before because she was in Louisiana for maybe a year or even two years because he went through the strawberry farm you know the time when the strawberry ripens and they had to pack it so he worked in Louisiana for a year or two and then he came here. So I know that he got here before my mother.

HC: And why did they decide to come to Rockford instead of any other place in the United States?

RS: Well, my father came because he was called by one cousin of his and said that there was work here. Well then when my mother married him that's how she came to Rockford.

HC: Had they ever been to this country before?

RS: No

HC: And did they come alone or with friends or members of their family?

RS: My father, I can't tell you for sure but I think he came alone because two of his brothers were already here so I think he came alone and of course you know they would let the man go by themselves but that was not the thing you did with women. But like I told you my mother she came with this friend of the family that was from the same town with, he was a widower, daughter and that was the companions the three of them except when they got on the ship the women went here and the men went someplace else.

HC: Did they know anyone here before they came?

RS: Yes, family. Of course I say family but also different people from their same village would be here and they gathered like it was one big family so it wasn't necessarily brothers and sisters: it was people from their village that had come and they would all welcome them every one of them with open arms see.

HC: What kind of work did your parents do when they arrived here in Rockford?

RS: My father worked for the railroad for a little while and then went to work for J. I Case Company and worked there till the day he died and my mother she worked as a seamstress in one of the factories in Chicago that made men's clothing because she was very good at that see and then when she got married and moved to Rockford she never went to work.

HC: Part two is about your experiences so I'm going to ask you more about more stuff about you specifically. Where did you live growing up?

RS: South Rockford.

HC: What was your home life like?

RS: Wonderful, wonderful, we had the best of all worlds. We were Americanized but yet Italian in the house.

HC: What was your neighborhood like?

RS: There again, all the Italians gathered in that area and it was wonderful and my mother did not have any brothers and sisters here. She did not have any brothers at all and so these were the family. We were family with the neighbor next door, across the street, everything. Everyone congregated in 1 yard sometimes and just talked and laughed and everything.

HC: What street did you live on?

RS: I lived on Morgan St. over by St. Anthony's Church and St. Anthony Church was the hub. Everybody was Catholic and everybody went to St. Anthony's Church from that area I should say.

HC: Did your parents speak English before they arrived to the United States?

RS: No.

HC: If not, did they learn any after they arrived?

RS: After they arrived they learned a little bit both of them before they were married for their jobs but then after we were born my sister and I we were the teachers. We went to school. When I went to kindergarten and first grade I spoke no English at all but the nuns, we had nuns, very patient and they taught us how to speak English than I would get home, or my sister and we'd start to talk to my mother in Italian and she started from day one no, no, no and we would look at her English, English. We had to talk English to her but she talked Italian to us. You talk about preserving everything all of their ethnic values that was it. She knew how important it was to learn English and pretty soon my mother was real, of course, in all fairness they both had what was a good education in those days in Italy. My mother went to the equivalent of the fifth grade and that probably was as good as our high school here at that time and my dad got as far as the third grade so they both could read and write and so it came a little bit easier for them to be.

HC: And also exposure from their past jobs.

RS: That's right they had at their past jobs but not the fluency that you would have in a conversation see.

HC: Was English your first language?

RS: No.

HC: And you spoke Italian up to kindergarten?

RS: Fully at home, absolutely.

HC: And then when you started kindergarten you were bilingual?

RS: Oh yes, and it didn't seem as hard. I don't remember it being hard at all. We didn't have any trouble you know what I mean but we did have the nuns and I remember Sister [unintelligible] God rest her soul. She was the most patient person. She must have been because we were all children of immigrants and didn't speak very good. Maybe a few of them did.

HC: Do you have sisters and brothers?

RS: I have one sister.

HC: Is she an older sister?

RS: She's younger.

HC: So you were the first one in kindergarten speaking English at home.

RS: I was a lawyer in the family.

HC: Would that influence your sister is so that when she started kindergarten.

RS: She spoke English then.

HC: So what language did your family speak at home?

RS: Italian. It was a Sicilian dialect because they came from Sicily.

HC: And again you answered this one way but we'll try another way. Did your parents encourage you to learn their native tongue or continue to use it as if it were your first language?

RS: No, they wanted us to learn it and to remember it but not continue it as a first language.

HC: What languages spoken in the neighborhood?

RS: The kids all, we all spoke English after you know we got outside playing. That's another thing that helps young people you know is to be with other children and you speak English. The grown ups, some of them spoke Italian to each other. Once in awhile they would put a word in their in English you know and then my mother for one she would look at me and go okay like did I say the right word? She's saying it and she doesn't know for sure they are understanding it. She might be saying something that was not right.

HC: How much schooling did your parents complete again?

RS: In Italy?

HC: Yes.

RS: My mother completed the equivalent of the fifth grade and I don't know how they judge those and my father, the third grade.

HC: And what were their attitudes about school and education?

RS: Oh, there was nothing coming before your homework, absolutely nothing.

HC: What emphasis did they place on your education?

RS: Very high. It was very high. It was necessary because they came here and they were not illiterate but they were because they were illiterate to the ways of this country and they did not want us to have any of that. You learn everything there is to learn.

HC: Did you go to a private school or a public school?

RS: Went to a parochial school through the eighth grade and then public high school.

HC: What were the school's names?

RS: Rockford High School. That's what it used to be. Now it's gone. Now it's East and West.

HC: Did you go to church or church school?

RS: Church school, St. Anthony's school, St. Anthony's parish.

HC: And what church you to go to?

RS: St. Anthony.

HC: Did you go to college?

RS: Two years.

HC: How important was that to your parents?

RS: Well, at the time it was expensive because it was depression time and so they thought can you manage if you just don't go on and then by the same token I had gotten a job and helped out financially so I just dropped it but then later on my father sat there and said that you should have finished, you should've kept going but you know when there was such a hardship for money and nobody had money and that.

HC: What year was that?

RS: 1941 or 42. In there.

HC: What college did you go to?

RS: Well first started out with Brown's Business College it was. I have to remember these old, they don't exist anymore and then I did some coursework throughout the country and different colleges because I belonged to the National Association of Educational Secretaries and we would use different conferences and then there was college courses that we took to, and so I accumulated quite a few.

HC: What was your first job?

RS: My first job was when I was 14 years old, against the law and it was they had in Rockford there was a furniture factory and they called it the Illinois Cabinet and I went there and applied. But do I have to tell you the rest? I was 14 years old and of course they weren't hiring unless you were 16. Well, I wrote it down as 16 and so that went along, this was summer work only because I was still going to school. I wrote it down and

then one of the four ladies and several of us were sitting down eating lunch and I don't know how it came about but well my mother and dad they got married in 1920. This one started to think. If you are born in 21 somewhere in there and she said oh , did you come before their wedding? But you know it didn't hurt me for some reason because I went back the following summer and they hired me again, yeah.

HC: What did you do at the job?

RS: Oh, they had all kinds of jobs. Some of the ladies did buffing they would wax the furniture and there was a lot of hard work on that. They didn't have the machines. The women were doing it you know and then when they did that then on the edges of the furniture you know that would get white and I was a stripper. I would have to go around on that and strip it with a stain.

HC: Now how did your parents feel about your working?

RS: My father was not happy with my going into place in a factory and on top of it all I was working piece work and all he had a fit. He said that will kill you. Piece work will kill you because he worked piece work all the time and so he knew what it was. My mother says I don't know why you want to go to a factory that's not what you are going to go to school for.

HC: And why did you?

RS: Because there were jobs open. They were hiring, everybody. You know all of these people that were running in there they would get a job and nobody else would hire you just for the summer, very few. They didn't have McDonald's at that time and that kind of thing so I went.

HC: So did you put the money towards the family then?

RS: Oh yeah.

HC: So it wasn't like really you are getting a job to be independent.

RS: The Italian girls were never independent.

HC: What other kinds of work did you do before you retired?

RS: Well, again I worked as a part timer as a clerk in Dixie's Dress Store selling ladies ready to wear and then I was finished with my business College and I worked in an insurance office and then I worked at Ropers, a factory that made stoves and everything but I was in the payroll department there and we worked at the payroll you know with the computers, not the computers we didn't have computers, [Comptometry] and then after that this job opening came up with the Rockford Board of Education and so I went to work more because I had the children and I got a job in one of the schools and stayed home in the summertime. Yeah, then when they grew up I went to the downtown office and worked full-time.

HC: What year did you retire?

RS: I've been retired I believe it was 1982.

HC: From the Rockford Board of Education?

RS: Yes

HC: Friends, family, community these are questions about both topics. Who were your friends growing up?

RS: Growing up, the neighbor girls, girls not too many boys. The neighbor people we went to the same schools. We were always together and so they as a matter of fact I'm going to have lunch with them that we were together from kindergarten up and those friends, they're friends. We still see each other. We are still together.

HC: Were those kids like yourself, and parents from Italy?

RS: Not all of them. Some of them their parents were born in Louisiana and so they did not, your grandparents come before them. I guess Louisiana was one of the places and Texas, lower Texas that a lot of them would come to because of the climate and the fact that they could work in the fields see.

HC: Did you ever play or hang around or fight with kids from other for an ethnic groups or different ethnic groups?

RS: Yeah, played. We ha had a black family that lived of course some of kind of a kitty corner thing from our house and George Roger James would come out and he would come out and we would play baseball. Used to be able to play football in the middle of the street you know and we played with them all the time and then not too far down we had don't know what they were. They were Swedish, the Wagner's. There were four children there and we all played together and we enjoyed each other's ethnic. Mrs. James used to make the best; she called them fried cakes, They were donuts and you know in the summertime there was no air conditioning boy we made sure we played right there by her house. Soon as they were ready she would come out with this plate of donuts for all of us Mrs. Wegner she made the best cakes you know. .

HC: How did you meet your friends?

RS: Well, like I said school and the neighborhood

HC: How do you feel your parents accepted American culture?

RS: Oh they accepted it, absolutely.

HC: Where they open to new ways or did they prefer traditional ways of behaving?

RS: You did not do much dating when like now they're kindergarten and they're dating so to speak and there wasn't any of that. To go to the school dances it was something to convince my father that we would like to go.

HC: Did you get to go?

RS: Most of the times we got to go.

HC: Did you ever disagree with your parents about things that you wanted to do or not to do, meaning things that you wanted to do that were more Americanized or that you didn't want to do because they were traditional or from the culture?

RS: Well, really it was like the dating thing that was something I would want to do for instance and of course they still haven't gotten over this business that you just don't but other than that we did the church things. Church would have dances in the hall and we were allowed to go there but not with the date. You went there and dance or whatever.

HC: What about clothing or anything like that?

RS: No, my mother made all of our clothes, yeah, my mother made all of our clothes.

HC: Were you ever embarrassed by your parents because they were different?

RS: No.

HC: Did anyone pick on you for your parents being different?

RS: No.

HC: Were there any customs or superstitions or traditions or celebrations that your parents did in their home country that they brought and that you celebrated or observed here in the United States?

RS: Sure, several of them. There was no Halloween but November 1 was the all Saints Day and as children you put your shoes by the door and the Saints would bring you fruit or treats. The best at the family could afford and that if you are good but if you are bad, if you have been bad you would find a chunk of coal in your shoes so that was the one thing and then Christmas. Our birthdays of course were just a family dinner. There was no gifts at our young age but Christmas would come and we didn't have a tree but they had the Nativity set and we would get up and presents weren't all wrapped or anything. We would find a doll or one little toy each but it was something they were doing here but I don't think they did that in Italy.

HC: Christmas?

RS: Gift always, I mean to get presents.

HC: The tree?

RS: No they didn't the tree absolutely.

HC: Did you ever start doing your Christmas tree?

RS: Oh yeah, as we grew up I might've been a junior or sophomore in high school and we convinced my dad that we should have that. Okay, who's going to go get it? We never had a car. I can't tell you where we got it or anything but in those days you would buy the lights you know that if one burnt out they would all burn out. That's the only kind that they had. Well you know electricity was hard to pay for also so we would turn that on and it was so wonderful. The minute we turned it on my father was sitting by the chair and you would unscrew bulb so that he could conserve electricity. We finally got wise.

HC: Were there any other customs or traditions that you did here?

RS: All of the religious things like baptisms were very, something that you had a big party for baptism, communion, confirmation. You know what was like you were going to have a big wedding. All the families and neighbors and everybody came.

HC: Any superstition? Did your mom or dad have some?

RS: My dad, no. If he did I don't really remember them. My mother, you know I remember she had some, I can't really tell you what it was it might come to me. She would say something about somebody would look at you with an evil eye and you would get sick or something but you know that was about it. It was like a warning to us really you know.

HC: Would any of those things that we just talked about do you still observe them?

RS: Yes. Oh yes.

HC: Did your parents feel that it was important for you to remember your roots?

RS: My mother did because like I said she did a lot of talking and so she did tell us you know. There was story telling time and she would tell us all of these things. My dad, once in a while he would put something in but not too much.

HC: As a young person did you have an interest in knowing their home country and customs?

RS: Not as much as I did later on.

HC: And if you are not interested then did you become interested in when you became older?

RS: Yes.

HC: And why?

RS: Maybe because I got to realize how rich our heritage was, but there was so much that we didn't understand as young people, see? And all the different things that we do like all of church things that we would do and the holidays and everything. I grew to think that this was the richest thing in the world, didn't have to have money for a lot of this you know and having gathering of people you know, this friends and family. I think I learned to appreciate it a lot more.

HC: Are your children interested?

RS: Not probably as much as I because they grew up in a different environment completely.

HC: Did your parents ever go back to visit after they moved here?

RS: No.

HC: Did you ever go to your parent's home country?

RS: Yes

HC: How many times?

RS: Twice.

HC: Do you have relatives that come to visit here?

RS: No.

HC: Do you keep in touch with relatives or friends outside of this country?

RS: No, not anymore. Note that, they have passed.

HC: Did you though?

RS: Yes my mother's, not her sister she had gone but her children so they would have been my first cousins in Italy and some that were in England.

HC: How did you correspond? Letters?

RS: Letters, yeah.

HC: Did your parents encourage you to help other members of their family come to this country?

RS: No, they didn't do that anymore after my mother got here and when my father after he got here he only had one brother left in Italy and he had had no desire to come.

HC: How close do you feel to your parent's country of origin?

RS: Probably much closer than I ever thought I would be because of having been there and having first the background with my parents and all that, having been there and seen the actual house that my mother was born in France since coming and don't and the way they lived and I was lucky when I went there. There was a lady that lived across the street from where my mother lived and she cornered me and she says you are from America she says in Italian and I says yeah and she says I played with your mother and so I had a nice conversation. Me with my broken Italian. It was not that perfect you know and you lose it after a while, see and she told me all of the different things and a lot of that my mother had talked about and this old lady you know had just brought it all to life again.

HC: Did you go there while your parents were still alive?

RS: No.

HC: So it was after?

RS: Yeah.

HC: You mentioned that you went to where your mother lived did you still not know enough about your father?

RS: I went there but his name was Joseph Lupo so they all says to me go to the big church in [unintelligible] and you can find. And so I go to the church and you know what our telephone book looks like? Okay, that's how it was; it was full of Lupos. I thought what do we do now? I found a priest that was there and he says my dear lady I don't know. All I know is my father was Giuseppe. His mother was Raphaela, her father was Salvador. So go down there was a whole mess of them. I couldn't find anybody. Now you wonder how children have such different names. They don't stay with family names. They have like apple and pear. The firstborn in a marriage if it's a girl she's named after the husband's mother. The first boy is named after his father. The mother gets her name down to the third child if it's a boy and a girl or if it's two girls they get right down the line like that. They use the parent's names. That's how Jasper you know St. Angel. Okay he's the second Jasper that I know of, you know and he's got a son whose name is Frank. That's after his father. See he's carrying it on a little bit too. His family did. His grandfather was a wonderful, wonderful man. He sponsored for my mother's and my father's both of their citizenship papers. Because you had to have somebody. They didn't in those days just walk in the door and give you a flag and now you are an American citizen. I remember, I was what five, not even five, could read and I had to sit and help them with their constitution because the judge would ask them questions on the Constitution.

HC: And they became then citizens?

RS: They became citizens.

HC: And you were born here so you were already a citizen?

RS: Yes.

HC: What made them want to become citizens?

RS: This was their new land, their new home. It was important.

HC: Would you ever consider leaving this country to live back in Italy?

RS: No maam.

HC: This is the last area questions just a few reflections. Do you want your children or if you have grandchildren to know about the culture?

RS: I have just the one son and he has never married and yes he knows about it because he has to take his turn having holidays.

HC: What do you hope the most for your son's future?

RS: I just hope that he would continue to be a good citizen. He's had a good education and I just hope that he would pass on even though he doesn't have children but he has nieces and nephews, cousins and that and pass on some of what he has learned from us.

HC: And the last question you can answer however comfortable would you feel about it how do you feel about the current debate in the country about immigration right now?

RS: I think everybody has a right for a better life and that's fine. What I do object strenuously to is English as a second language. They are never going to learn and then that's fine like I said maybe it's because of my own background that we had to teach them sort of and that was important to my parents that they learned English and that's the part that I object to and the fact that they came on a quota. They did not just sneak in. They couldn't there was no such thing. Of course I use my own parents as an example and that and I think that it's not just fair. We are good hard workers and I know some of them and I know they are real good hard workers and I feel for them but I keep thinking why don't they learn more about the English and the ways in this country so that they could be absorbed into it a little easier. But I think they should, I don't think we should keep them out, no way. Everybody has a right but we want to keep our laws and everything intact.