

**Val DeCastris**

**Interviewed March 13, 2008  
By Jean Seegers  
Midway Village Museum**

Jean Seagus: What is your name?

Val DeCastris: Val DeCastris.

JS: Is Val your full name?

VD: Well, my first name is Valentino but I go by Val DeCastris.

JS: Okay. And, where do you live?

VD: 4021 Guilford Road in Rockford, Illinois.

JS: You have a daughter, Valeri?

VD: Yes.

JS: Do you have any other children?

VD: No, just the daughter Valeri.

JS: And you are married?

VD: Yes I am. This is my second marriage.

JS: Okay. And what is your wife's name?

VD: Marian.

JS: Where were you educated?

VD: At the public schools here in Rockford Illinois.

JS: Which ones did you go to?

VD: Grade school, O.F. Barbour and then high school I went to Roosevelt Junior High, Washington Jr. High and finally to West High. I graduated in forty-four.

JS: And where did you work?

VD: Well, I have always been a musician all my life so if you want to call that work.

JS: Work and fun?

VD: Right.

JS: When did you start doing that?

VD: It must've been professionally when I got out of the Army which I was around age maybe 20 years old or 21, professionally but I was a musician before that also though.

JS: And you said you were in the Army?

VD: Yes, I was.

JS: Where were you stationed?

VD: In the Philippines, Manila and then finally in Tokyo in Japan.

JS: Did you do any playing when you were in the service?

VD: Well, when I first got in the service I was in the Infantry. I tried to get into the band because I was a musician but I just could not get in so I would say 95% of my duties were in the Infantry but I eventually got an opportunity to join the Army band which I was in for the rest of the duration of the war.

JS: Where did you play? In one particular place?

VD: We played all over Tokyo, Japan, Yokohama, all the service clubs.

JS: What did you play?

VD: I played string bass and the big bass drum for the marching band.

JS: Now where did you learn to play the bass?

VD: I learned here in Rockford - there was a friend of mine who was a bass player years ago and I'm trying to think of his name now. Anyway, he taught me how to play bass. And then when I was traveling with an orchestra and I was in San Francisco I studied with the first bass player of the Symphony, San Francisco Symphony. I studied with him for a while but I would say 80% of that is all self-taught.

JS: And how long have you been doing that as a career?

VD: Well let's see now, I have been doing it since I was 12 years old.

JS: And you are how old now?

VD: I am 81 now.

JS: That's about almost 60 year isn't it? And where are you playing now? You said that you were still playing.

VD: I am playing in a jazz trio at The Gun Club in Beloit and I have been there about four or five years now, every Saturday. It used to be that I was playing every night but the way things are today one night a week or two nights a week is plenty for me now.

JS: And are you playing anywhere else?

VD: One Friday a month I play at the Stockholm Inn in Rockford, Illinois and then I play with different dance clubs in town once in a while. Once in a while they will call me to play for a dance club dance and they have them at different places every month. But the majority of my playing is done at the Gun Club in Beloit.

JS: Now what country is your family originally from?

VD: My family is from Italy.

JS: Any particular town?

VD: A little town called Ferentino which is between Naples and Rome.

JS: And when did your parents come here?

VD: Well, my dad came here when he was 15 years of age so that was before I was born of course. I was born in 1926. He came here when he was 15 years of age, when the First World War was declared and he actually served in Europe in fact. He came over here, became a citizen and then got drafted to go into the army and fight the war in France. So that was a long time ago.

JS: That's World War I?

VD: Right.

JS: And your mother?

VD: She is from the same town and she came here also at I think they were all 16 and 17 years of age when they all came over.

JS: Did they know each other at that time?

VD: They knew, my dad yeah from Italy but they got married here in America.

JS: They dated and got to know each other in America?

VD: Yeah, right.

JS: Did they come right to Rockford?

VD: Yes, they came to Rockford from Italy and that's a funny story. There's a little funny story that when my mother landed in New York on Ellis Island they were asking people where they were going and they wanted to know where "Rockford ill" was at and the people said they never heard of it. They didn't know that it was Illinois. They just knew it was Rockford quotation marks "ill."

JS: And they came in from New York?

VD: Yeah, through Ellis Island.

JS: They both did, both parents?

VD: Yes.

JS: Do you know what year that was when they came?

VD: No, I don't.

JS: You said they were 15 or 16 years old?

VD: Yes. It had to be eighteen something.

JS: Did they ever talk about their experiences when they landed at Ellis Island?

VD: My mother did in a way. It was pretty hectic.

JS: What did she remember about it? What did she tell you?

VD: They were so scared to come here. I still don't believe how they made it here. They didn't speak the language, they were teenagers.

JS: Their parents were not with them?

VD: No, my mother's father came over later. I am recalling now that she used to tell me he came to visit and he was here for a while and got ill and died here and he is buried here in Rockford. He never did go back. But my parents never went back to Italy. Once they got here that was it.

JS: But their parents came later on you are saying?

VD: No, my mother's father came over later on and he stayed here for a while but he passed away while he was here.

JS: What did your father do for a living?

VD: He worked at J.I. Case Company for years and he also was an insurance salesman.

JS: Did your mother work?

VD: No, in the old days women never worked.

JS: Were you an only child?

VD: No, I have a sister.

JS: Is she living?

VD: Yes, she is still living.

JS: Does she live in Rockford?

VD: Yes, she lives in Rockford with five children.

JS: But your parents went to school before they came here right? Did they graduate from high school?

VD: Well, my dad now he told me he went to like the fourth or fifth grade and that was like going to high school here but my mother did not have much education. Maybe one or two years that's about it. They were so poor in those days that they just couldn't afford anything.

JS: How did they get to America?

VD: I don't know how they ever did it; when I stop to think of that I wonder myself; they were so poor but they still came here.

JS: What do you think made them want to come?

VD: Because there was no work there; it was just terrible conditions. They were starving in those days.

JS: Why do you think they came to Rockford?

VD: Well, they had a friend that came here first. He's the one that started it all. He would write back to them and tell them to come to America at Rockford, Illinois there was a lot of work there, at that time that time there was in those days. The factories were going full blast then.

JS: And your father worked in hardware?

VD: He worked at J.I Case. They made plows and things for farmers, like John Deere. In fact that was their competitor, I think, J. I. Case.

JS: They had never come here before that?

VD: No.

JS: You mentioned they were teenagers. Were there a group of them that came over with them?

VD: That I don't remember but I presume there were a few of them from the same town that came over at the same time.

JS: Did they talk about what they did when they got here? Where did they find a place to live?

VD: Well, in those days when they came to Rockford people would have what you called boarders. People would rent a room and they would have their food and everything there, room and board. Maybe there were five or six people living in one house. And I don't know how they did it because in the old days they had those potbelly stoves instead of furnaces.

JS: Do you know where they lived and when they came here?

VD: Yeah, my mother and dad they lived on Cunningham Street. I remember the address, 902 and 918.

JS: Did you live there too?

VD: I lived at 918. That's where my daughter lives today.

JS: When they came you said they went to Ellis Island. How did they get out to Rockford?

VD: That I don't know. I have never found that out. I presume it was a train in those days.

JS: Did they know anybody here before they came?

VD: Yeah, that's the person that wrote them and told them to come over. It was a distant cousin of theirs.

JS: You had to have a sponsor at that time right?

VD: Yes, you did.

JS: Did this person help them get settled?

VD: Yeah, because he was familiar where the places were for them to live. I wouldn't know I'm just speculating now that's what they did.

JS: Cunningham area is kind of an Italian enclave isn't it?

VD: Yeah, in those days it was all Italian neighborhood very clean and neat and music all the time.

JS: Did any other family members come after your parents came, brothers and sisters of theirs?

VD: Well, my father's brothers came way after that. One's name was Frank and the other was Natalino.. But this is way afterward . When I say way after that it was way back in the 1920s. His other siblings stayed in Ferentino, Italy. I forgot when my Uncle Natalino came over here, the 1940s or 1950s or something like that, after the second world war. My father's brothers, were having a bad time there because everything was bombed out and they were just completely wiped out. In fact, The DeCastris home was bombed and Natalino was injured and his mother-in-law killed. So he sent for his brother Natalino. Later, Natalino sent for his family and they're all here now except for one son who stayed in Italy.

JS: You said you lived on Cunningham in that area while you were growing up?

VD: Right.

JS: What was your home life like?

VD: Well, my dad never spoke English when he first got here or my mother but he sure learned because when I was a kid I remember my dad with a dictionary in his hand every day, learning new words, learning new words. He learned the English language very, very good.

JS: Did he take classes or anything?

VD: No, he just studied on his own. He became a politician.

JS: Did he run for office?

VD: He ran for office. At that time it was the fifth Ward and it was the only Democratic ward in the whole city of Rockford at the time and of course he would go out and make speeches in Italian to the Italian people.

JS: He ran for alderman then?

VD: No, he was a Democratic State Central Committeeman here. He was also the Secretary of Winnebago County Democratic Party at that time. Edward O'Shea was the chairman.

JS: An Irishman?

VD: Yeah, that's how I get my name Val Eddy. That was Eddie O'Shea. At confirmation I took his name. He was my sponsor.

JS: So it was just you and your sister and your parents in the home?

VD: Right.

JS: What was your neighborhood like?



VD: It was a quiet neighborhood, all Italians, hard-working people and they took pride in their homes and lawns and everything. In those days if you saw one car pass on the street every hour and a half you were lucky.

JS: Did you play with mainly Italian children then?

VD: Yes, we were all from the same neighborhood. We were all Italian but we all spoke English. The kids spoke English.

JS: Did your mother?

VD: She spoke very broken English. But my dad was very fluent in English.

JS: Why do you suppose she didn't?

VD: Because she lived in the neighborhood where all the same women would gather and all speak Italian. It was one of those gossip things every day.

JS: Did they speak English to each other? Your parents I meant.

VD: No, my dad did when he was with people but my mother was always in Italian with her friends.

JS: So around the dinner table everybody spoke Italian?

VD: Both ways, I would speak English to my dad and I would speak Italian to my mother. .

JS: And you say your father was pretty fluent?

VD: Yeah, in the language.

JS: Did they encourage you to speak English?

VD: Not really we just automatically did that. We went to school so we just spoke English.

JS: They didn't try to keep the Italian?

VD: No they never demanded that we speak Italian, no.

JS: Even your mother?

VD: No.

JS: How much school did your parents complete?

VD: My dad I think completed fourth or fifth grade which he told me was equivalent to high school here in America.

JS: And then what did he do?

VD: There was nothing to do that's why they came over here at that young age.

JS: What was your parent's attitude about school and education?

VD: My dad was a stickler on that; he said get your education that's the most important thing in the world.

JS: Is your sister educated?

VD: Yes, she has a high school education also.

JS: So they put a lot of emphasis on education?

VD: Yes, they sure did.

JS: And you went to public school?

VD: I went to O.F. Barbour for grade school.

JS: And how about church where did you go to church?

VD: St. Anthony's Church which is in South Rockford.

JS: Did you go to college at all?

VD: When I got out of the Army I went to musical College for about three quarters of a year.

VD: Where was that?

VD: In Chicago, Chicago Conservatory of Music.

JS: About a nine-month course?

VD: Right.

JS: And how was that?

VD: I learned a lot there, I studied from a bassist for the Symphony of Chicago, his name was Fossbender, one of the best in the country and I learned a lot from him.

JS: And then you came back to Rockford?

VD: Right, after the army I came back to Rockford. I no sooner got off the bus and a friend of mine said what are you doing in Rockford? I said I just got out of the Army and he said do you

want to play with a band and I said I haven't gotten home yet let me think about it. And he said no, no I've got to tell you about a guy who is looking for a bass player for his orchestra. His name was Del Courtney and his band was very popular in the country. He said come here and he picked up the phone and calls him and says I got this bass player here if you want him. I couldn't believe what he was saying. So he puts me on the phone and he says I am Del Courtney and I am looking for a bass player would you like a job? I says I just got out of the Army. I can't do it now but he says well we'll wait about two or three weeks. To make a long story short, I joined the band about a month later.

JS: Did they tour around?

VD: He toured the whole country. We played almost every place except the East Coast.

JS: And did you enjoy that?

VD: Oh did I ever, I was just a kid then, I was seeing the country for nothing.

JS: So that was your first job really?

VD: Big time job, yeah.

JS: Have you done any other work besides that, besides music?

VD: No I've always done music all my life.

JS: How did your parents feel about that?

VD: They didn't like it when I first got into it because it's a hard life for one thing and it's not that steady but for me, God was on my side I guess because I've been playing every single night for the last 50 years, more than that I think too.

JS: Who were your friends when you were growing up?

VD: Well, mostly the neighborhood friends and then I got to know musicians when you were playing different groups you get to know different people. One thing leads to another but mainly when I was a kid it was only the neighborhood kids that we went to school with.

JS: Did you run around with any other kids other than Italian?

VD: Yeah, mostly musicians though.

JS: When you got older right?

VD: Yeah, well I was a musician like when I was 15 years old but I've been playing different jobs and things that's how I got to know a lot of people too.

JS: Were there any gangs? I know I heard that the Irish and the Italians did a lot of fighting.

VD: We never did, not in our neighborhood. We had what you call a gang but not the gangs that they have today, just a group of boys that had their own neighborhoods but we never had any fights of any kind. Other sections of town did but we didn't.

JS: But it did happen in other areas?

VD: Oh yeah, but not us. I'll tell you one reason we never had any problems. When I was a kid, I'm talking about when I was maybe 12, 13 or 14 years old. We would be out playing in the streets and every night at nine o'clock here comes this motorcycle, a three wheeler with this big heavy policemen, Shoalwalter was his name, he would come up and say "what are you kids doing here at nine o'clock" and we would scatter, all go home. That was it every single night that cop came along and told us to go home. But that wouldn't work today though I don't think.

JS: How do you think your parents accepted the American culture?

VD: They loved it, I remember my mother saying in Italian bless America it's a beautiful country. She could never get over how wonderful it was here.

JS: Did she talk about missing Italy at all?

VD: Oh sure, they missed Italy. They had relatives there.

JS: Were they open to the new ways of doing things here?

VD: Yeah, they were.

JS: Because that's pretty different probably from Italy.

VD: Well, we were in much better shape than they were and we had more work here in those days. I mean as far as things for the home or how can I say it, their homes were about the same as they were here but their homes were bombed out. That was World War II and they were in bad shape and were at war.

JS: Did they keep up a lot of the traditions?

VD: Yes they did.

JS: Like what?

VD: Like for instance, they have a saint from their city, St. Ambrose and we do have a club here St. Ambrose which I belong to and once a year they have a big feast, it's usually in August and they celebrate here the same way as they do in Italy today. Just a big feast, bingo games, food and of course, Italians have to have food you know.

JS: Special kind of food?

VD: Yeah, Italian sausages, tripe.

JS: Tripe, which is what?

VD: Cow stomach.

JS: Did your mother serve that in your house a lot?

VD: Yeah, my mother was a terrific cook. My daughter still can't figure out how they did it in a little kitchen like that with two or three pans.

JS: What other kind of food did you have?

VD: Well, in the old days we knew exactly what you were going to eat. Monday was chicken soup. Tuesday was something else. Wednesday was polenta, which is nothing but corn meal. You never ate meat on Fridays, that was a mortal sin. Saturday maybe we didn't know what you're going to eat. Sunday, you had a big feast, chicken soup, spaghetti. I never liked Monday because it was always soup.

JS: Did your mother always invite a lot of people?

VD: Yes, in those days you always had people over. Your house was open to everybody. You wouldn't come into my mother's house unless you would sit down and eat. I used to get mad at her when she would ask everyone to eat. If you would say no she would say oh yes, you have to have something and she would put it right in front of you. I would tell her they probably don't want to eat ma, leave them alone, no they are just bashful she would say.

JS: Did you and your mother or father have disagreements about what to wear or places that you wanted to go?

VD: No, of course the old days the father, you didn't sass the father.

JS: So there wasn't a clash of cultures too much?

VD: No, what do you mean?

JS: Well, the old culture and the new culture, was there difficulties with you being an American and them Italian.

VD: No, of course when I was a teenager you didn't disagree with your parents like they do today. We never had any problem in that way. We always respected our parents and respected what they were accomplishing.

JS: Did you ever feel like many teenagers today that your parents embarrassed you?

VD: Yes, my mother would go from Cunningham Street and go all the way downtown and didn't know how to speak one word of English and go shopping and come back with whatever she wanted and she got along alright. I used to get embarrassed when I would go with her places and I would have to translate and that was an embarrassing thing for me. I would say why can't you speak English but today everybody does that.

JS: But she did manage to do that?

VD: Yes, she did it herself. She would go downtown, do shopping and come back with everything we needed, but I don't know how she did it. But my dad could speak fluently.

JS: Did you have a car or did she take the bus?

VD: She walked, from Cunningham Street all the way downtown.

JS: And carried groceries back?

VD: Yeah.

JS: Did anybody ever pick on you for being different?

VD: No.

JS: You said you had customs and traditions. Do you still have these customs or traditions in your home when you were raising your family?

VD: Yeah, we did it in a way. Not like it used to be though. For instance like Christmas Eve you would never see anybody eating anything but fish on Christmas Eve. And then at midnight my mother would always leave the table in the dining room full of food for the baby Jesus to come and have some. We did that for a while but that's all different now.

JS: What other traditions did you grow up with?

VD: There is a feast that they call La Befana which comes after Christmas. We actually celebrated more than Christmas.

JS: What happened on that day?

VD: It's the same as Christmas, you get gifts and things but you would always get a stocking full of coal too. One stocking would be filled with coal, the other candy. In the old days they didn't have money to buy gifts. It was either candy or fruit or they would actually make the cookies for you.

JS: What did the coal signify?

VD: That you were bad, the bad things that you did.

JS: And everybody got a piece of coal?

VD: Yeah, you have to be bad sometimes.

JS: Were there any superstitions that you can remember?

VD: Yeah, my mother would always give a superstition, she was deathly afraid of when she heard an owl.

JS: What did that mean?

VD: Somebody was going to die and sometimes somebody usually did when you heard an owl. That's kind of scary.

JS: Did your parents feel that it was important for you and your sister to remember your roots?

VD: Not really. No. But they appreciated that we did. They must have known that.

JS: When you were younger did you have an interest in knowing about how they grew up?

VD: Yeah, I used to ask questions all the time.

JS: Did they want to talk about it?

VD: Yeah they use to tell me when we were kids. My aunt, for instance, my mother's sister, my mother tells me that she's always complaining if the sun shining its terrible, if it's warm it's too cold. If they give her this kind of food she doesn't like it it's always different. And she said that she wanted to become a nun which she should have really because she would've been a good nun. I don't know why I am bringing that up.

JS: Did you find that you've got more interested in it as you got older as you had your own family?

VD: Yeah, I did. As far as traditions and roots? Yes I did.

JS: And your children are interested?

VD: My daughter is completely interested in it.

JS: How often have you been back?

VD: I've never been there.

JS: You've never got back?

VD: No, I have never been there.

JS: But you've never gone to visit?

VD: No.

JS: Did your parents ever go back?

VD: No, My daughter's gone there and saw all of our relatives there.

JS: Do you relatives come to this country?

VD: Yeah I think they have.

JS: Do you keep in touch with friends and relatives?

VD: I don't but my daughter does with the e-mails now-a-days now it's easy to do.

JS: Did your parents encourage your daughter; were they still alive?

VD: Yeah, my mother was.

JS: Did she try to convey what it was like in Italy and all of these traditions and maybe foods and all that. Did she try to pass it all onto her granddaughter?

VD: I think so. She used to tell her a lot of things about that but she was pretty young at the time.

JS: Do you feel close to your origins?

VD: Yes, I do.

JS: Would you ever consider leaving this country and go live back in Italy?

VD: No.

JS: Did your parents ever say what they liked most about America?

VD: Just the opportunities that you have here, access to every thing you know, television, food-wise, and elections. They liked the freedom. The main thing is that they got work and they were paid for their work to become somebody.

JS: How long did it take before they became citizens?

VD: You see I don't know about that. They were citizens through the legal way.



JS: What do you hope for your own children's children's future?

VD: The American Dream and happiness and contentment.

JS: How do you feel about the debate that goes on right now about immigrants coming to this country and illegal immigrants?

VD: I am strongly opposed to that; I think it should all be legally done like my parents had to go through to become a citizen. Everybody should be able to do that.

JS: How about the immigrants themselves, not the illegals but the regular immigration?

VD: We should have immigration that is what this country is built on but it has to be the legal way. Why should somebody wait two or three years to get in and someone else just waltzes in and becomes one. That's not right.

JS: Let's talk about what your dad was in politics. How old were you at the time?

VD: Oh, I must've been 12, 13, or 14 years old and he was a State Central Committeeman. He took his job to heart, he thought that he was going to help everybody and I remember people coming over and saying please can you help us out, we need a job, we don't have anything and he would say I will see what I can do. By God, he would eventually get a job or something for them to do but he was always helping, helping, helping, trying to help which I was hoping more politicians would be like that today.

JS: So how long did he do that?

VD: For quite a while.