

John Ianni

Interviewed 12/28/2007
By Jean Seegers
Midway Village Museum

John Ianni

Jean Seegers: What is your name?

John Ianni: John Ianni

JS: And are you married, widowed, divorced...

Jl: I'm widowed...

JS: And how many children did you have?

Jl: Two...

JS: And their names...

Jl: Paula and Marilyn...

JS: And your wife's name...

Jl: My wife's name was Mamie...

JS: Your children are they both in the area?

Jl: Well Marilyn died. Paula's in Greenville, South Carolina.

JS: Do you have grandchildren?

Jl: Does she have children?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Do you have grandchildren?

Jl: Yes

JS: And their names?

Jl: John and Sarah

JS: What about your education? Were you educated in Rockford?

Jl: Yes high school.

JS: How long have you been in this country?

Jl: Since 1927...

JS: And you came from where...

J: Italy...

JS: Whereabouts...

Jl: I came from a town on the Adriatic side the Mediterranean called the Montagali.

JS: What kind of town was it was it a small town?

Jl: Yeah it was a real small, small hilly town I think I told you the story about tying a bandanna around the chicken's rear so the egg wouldn't roll down the hill.

JS: It was very hilly there?

Jl: Yeah.

JS: And you came in 1927 you said?

Jl: Yes and I got put on Ellis Island

JS: Who did you come with?

Jl: Well I came with my father and my mother...

JS: And your sister also?

Jl: No she stayed in Rome she married the postmaster in Rome and she stayed there and that's why I have three nieces in Italy yet near (Imbratia?)...

JS: She was quite a bit older than you...

Jl: Yes she was the oldest.

JS: How many children?

Jl: Who?

JS: How many siblings did you have?

Jl: Me?

JS: You had your older sister and was there another one was it just the two of you?

Jl: It was my brother and my sister and me.

JS: And how old were you when you came here?

Jl: Five

JS: Do you remember anything about your life in Italy before you came here?

Jl: No not very much...

JS: Why do you think your parents wanted to come to the United States?

Jl: Land of opportunity.

JS: Were they poor? Did they have trouble making money?

Jl: Yes, yes we came from a poor family.

JS: How did you come to come to the United States did someone sponsor you?

Jl: No I came with my folks.

JS: I meant your family did someone sponsor them did you have relatives in the United States?

Jl: .Um yes my mother had relatives here in Rockford.

JS: And they encouraged you to come?

Jl: Yes well we stopped when we came we stopped at Ellis Island then we went to Pennsylvania and from there we came to Rockford.

JS: How long did you spend in Pennsylvania?

Jl: A year

JS: How about Ellis Island?

Jl: Just a jump off place.

JS: Did you not like Philadelphia?

Jl: We didn't go to Philadelphia...

JS: Where did you say that you were?

Jl: Pittsburgh...

JS: You didn't like it there?

Jl: I don't remember my dad was a coal miner...

JS: Was there work for him here in Rockford

Jl: My dad...

JS: Was there some work for him to do?

Jl: Here in Rockford no we went on Cunningham Road and we went on a little farm a little farm house and we lived there and we had some cows and my dad would take the milk and make these little cheeses, round cheese and we had cheese all over the basement and up in the third-floor and that's why I hate cheese. I can't stand cheese.

JS: So he was a cheese maker that's what your father did he was a cheese maker?

Jl: He was a coal miner.

JS: But in the United States...

Jl: Yes on the farm he made cheese...

JS: Is that what he did to make a living or did he have some other job?

Jl: Well we had some acreage there and we farmed the acreage.

JS: Did you own the property?

Jl: No

JS: Do you remember why your parents decided to come to America was it because they thought they could do better here?

Jl: Yes

JS: And you had relatives in Rockford?

Jl: Yes

JS: You had never been in this country before had you?

Jl: No

JS: Did you come with other people besides your parents and your brother was there a group of you that came?

Jl: I don't remember. I imagine there was

JS: Do you remember your trip here across you took a boat I imagine.

Jl: Yes

JS: Did your family know anyone before you came here other than that sister?

Jl: Well we had two uncles that lived here, Joe Rossi and Carl Ross.

JS: They lived in Rockford?

Jl: Yes they were both plumbers.

JS: And did they help you get settled then?

Jl: Yes

JS: Did you live at that address most of your growing up years on Cunningham Road you said you lived on Cunningham?

Jl: Well we lived there for a while yes.

JS: And then where did you go?

Jl: Then I bought a house on Dresden Avenue by Rockford Memorial.

JS: Your parents did or...

Jl: I did...

JS: That's when you grew up?

Jl: Yes 2409 Dresden Ave.

JS: Where did you go to school when you were living out on Cunningham?

Jl: I went to West High School. I was the first graduates from West High School.

JS: Was it your mother's brothers that were living here?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Did they live out on that same area?

Jl" Yes they lived in Rockford.

JS: Did your mother work?

Jl: No.

JS: What was it like in your home did you have a lot of Italian customs that you kept alive could you tell me some of them please?

Jl: Well Christmas time we made cannoli and stuff like that and then we'd have fish before midnight and stuff like that.

JS: That was the custom?

Jl: Yes then go to church.

JS: Any other besides Christmas customs that you had?

Jl: Well Thanksgiving we always had Thanksgiving at our house on Dresden down in the basement.

JS: What was your neighborhood like when you were out on Cunningham Road was it all Italians or was it kind of a mix of people.

Jl: No know it was a mix.

JS: Did you associate mainly with Italian people?

Jl: No our neighbors were named Garrett they were Catholics but very nice people.

JS: Did your parents speak Italian most of the time in your home?

Jl: Yes.

JS: And you understood it?

Jl: Yes.

JS: When did you start speaking English?

Jl: When I came to the United States.

JS: You started school maybe?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Did they learn English pretty fast or were they kind of reluctant?

Jl: Well my mother never learned it too fast neither did my father.

JS: They were more comfortable with Italian did they speak any at all when they came any English when they came to this country?

Jl: Very little if any.

JS: Was English your first language or it was just something you spoke at home?

Jl: We spoke mostly Italian at home. I went to school here. I went to O.F. Barber School on Montague Rd. there and you know as a joke I never did learn how to cut hair. It's a barber school.

JS: Did your folks encourage you to speak English and become more Americanized?

Jl: Yes.

JS: What did they say? What did they do?

Jl: Well they said this was a land of opportunity we should live with what their customs are.

JS: To learn to speak English huh?

Jl: Yeah

JS: How about the rest of the neighborhood did you find a lot of different languages in your neighborhood?

Jl: Oh yes there were all kinds of people. There were colored people; there were white people some were nice some didn't care.

JS: How much schooling did your parents complete in Italy?

Jl: I don't think very much neither one of them.

JS: What was their attitude about school?

Jl: Well they know you have to have an education to get by.

JS: Did they encourage you?

Jl: Oh yes very much so.

JS: Beyond high school did they encourage you to go beyond high school?

Jl: Well yes but I never got above high school.

JS: I just wondered if they talked about you going to college.

Jl: Well yes they believed in education.

JS: And you went to Barbour School you said and then you went to West High?

Jl: Yes.

JS: How about church where did you go to church?

Jl: Well actually I went to St. Bernadette's over on the west side.

JS: Were you pretty involved with the church?

Jl: Yes.

Jl: How about your parents?

Jl: Yes we were the originals there.

JS: So your parents were pretty involved with the school?

Jl: No.

JS: What did your mom do you said she didn't work and she wasn't involved with the church did she have some kind of hobbies or something that she did that occupied her time?

Jl: No she had troubles she had rheumatism and arthritis and stuff so she couldn't do too much.

JS: So she just kind of stayed at home?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Did the Italians in your neighborhood or those that you knew your relatives did you get together at a club or anything like that did you belong to any organization?

JS: No I didn't.

JS: Your family?

Jl: No

JS: What was your first job?

Jl: I worked at Barber Colman.

JS: That was your first job?

Jl: Yes I took an apprenticeship there.

JS: And what did you do?

Jl: I learned to become a machinist.

JS: How long was your apprenticeship?

Jl: It was supposed to be four years.

JS: Is that what it was?

Jl: Yes.

JS: And then you are on your own doing it what did you do tell me about what you did?

Jl: I became a tool and die maker and I became a lead man in tool and die on the fourth floor of Barber Colman.

JS: How old were you when you started that?

Jl: I don't know.

JS: You were out of high school?

Jl: Yes.

JS: And were you living at home at the time?

Jl: Yes.

JS: How did your parents feel about you working there?

Jl: Okay.

JS: Have you done any other kind of work besides working at Barber Colman?

Jl: Well I took up a hobby fixing lawnmowers and snow blowers, vacuum cleaners and stuff like that. I got a garage back here which I still do that.

JS: Did you do that all through your working years?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Now when you moved to Dresden you said is where you lived Dresden that's a street in Rockford right?

Jl: Yes.

JS: In addition to regular jobs did you do that all through the years?

Jl: No.

JS: It was a hobby more or less. Who were your friends when you were young?

Jl: Well I had a lot of friends. I don't know who they are.

JS: Have you kept in touch with them?

Jl: No.

JS: No one from the old neighborhood okay do you remember your friends back then what kind of kids they were?

Jl: No.

JS: You don't remember them?

Jl: No.

JS: Do you think most of them were from different places maybe not born in the United States?

Jl: Yes there was a mixture.

JS: You don't remember much about the kids or what you did to play what kind of things you did?

Jl: No I don't.

JS: How do you feel about how your parents accepted our American culture did you agree that they wanted to remain an Italian?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Or did you encourage them to try to be more American?

Jl: Well we wanted to go with the flow.

JS: Can you think of any instances where your mother or father didn't accept the American culture they wanted to keep things as they were?

Jl: No.

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

Jl: Oh yes very much so.

JS: How about their clothing and that type of thing did they dress like Americans?

Jl: They dressed regularly.

Jl: Were you ever embarrassed that they were a little different?

Jl: No.

JS: Did anybody ever pick on you or your brother or your parents for being different?

Jl: Well yes they picked on me at Barber Colman. They told me I was in the Mafia and everything else. I had nothing to do with Sicily because I came from northern Italy but they would still pick on you you know.

JS: Do you think it was done in a mean way or were they just teasing you?

JS: No, no they meant it.

JS: Did they ever get angry or get physical with you or anything like that?

Jl: Yes I worked in a tool gang you know and then I got transferred to the die gang at Barber Colman and I asked the guy there his name was Oscar Bolander if I could get in the die gang and he says oh my no; we have nothing but Scandinavians here so I got thrown out.

JS: Because you were Italian?

Jl: Yes.

JS: How did you feel about that?

Jl: Well I felt slighted but you have to take it as it comes.

JS: Were there any superstitions or customs or traditions that you continued to do in your own home after leaving your own home did you keep up some of these traditions?

Jl: What kind of traditions?

JS: Whatever Italian traditions.

Jl: Yes we cooked a lot of Italian food and we kept a lot of customs.

JS: Now what was your wife's name?

Jl: Mamie.

JS: Was Mamie Italian also?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Did she was she second-generation in the United States were her parents born in Italy also?

Jl: No she was born in America.

JS: Did she bring customs and things into your marriage too from her family?

Jl: No she was Sicilian.

JS: Were there any Italian superstitions that you can tell me about?

Jl: Not really.

JS: You don't know any Italian superstitions? Okay. Did they celebrate any other holidays or anything Italians then we celebrate in this country?

Jl: No well they celebrate St. Lucy Day or something which was a holiday

JS: Is that shortly before Christmas?

Jl: I don't remember before or after I don't.

JS: Were you involved in that then?

Jl: No.

JS: Did your parents think it was important for you to remember your roots?

Jl: Yes sure.

JS: What did they say about that?

Jl: They didn't say much about it but everybody likes to remember their heritage.

JS: And they encouraged you to do that?

Jl: Yes.

JS: When you were young did you have an interest in knowing what your parents life was like in Italy did you ask them questions?

Jl: Yes I had a grandfather that was from Italy. He came over to this country. My two uncles brought him over. He was hard of hearing; he liked to play cards and we lived out on the farm like I told you and he'd walk on the farm and play cards. He would walk back but then they sent him back to Italy and he died out there at a ripe old age.

JS: Was he just here visiting?

Jl: Well he wanted to go back.

JS: He missed Italy?

Jl: Yes.

JS: How long was he here?

Jl: I don't know maybe five years I'm guessing.

JS: And then he wanted to go back home?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Did you have a lot of contact with him?

Jl: Yes.

JS: What did you do together?

Jl: Well we played cards.

JS: Anything else?

Jl: No.

JS: Do you think you became more interested in knowing about your previous life in Italy or your parent's life as you got older as you got older did you think more about your roots?

Jl: No not really.

JS: Have you been back to Italy?

Jl: No I'm not going back either.

JS: You're not interested in going back?

Jl: No.

JS: Now why is that?

Jl: I'm happy here.

JS: How about your children are they interested?

Jl: Well Marilyn went back and she visited with my nieces while she was there in Venice but since then she died. Now my other one I think they went back there but I don't think I'm not sure if they made contact with my nieces or not.

JS: Are there quite a few relatives there than you said nieces and nephews do they come and visit?

Jl: No.

JS: Never?

Jl: No I never hear from them.

JS: Did your parents ever go back?

Jl: No.

JS: You keep in touch do you write do you write to your nieces or nephews?

Jl: No.

JS: Are there friends or relatives that you kept in contact with in that country?

Jl: Well I got an aunt that's down in St. Anne's. She's come from Italy I see her quite a bit and keep in touch with her.

JS: She came here at a younger age also to this country?

Jl: Yes

JS: Did your parents encourage you to help other people to come to this country to immigrate?

Jl: Not really, no.

JS: Do you feel close to your original country or do you just feel...

Jl: America is my country.

JS: When did you become a citizen?

Jl: Well basically I was a citizen before I came over.

JS: How's that?

Jl: Well my father was a citizen when he went back and then I was born so I was automatically a citizen.

JS: You had dual citizenship?

Jl: Yes

JS: You were a citizen of both America and.

Jl: Well I was born in Italy but I had American citizenship.

JS: Why is that?

Jl: Because my father was a citizen.

JS: I see okay so your father was really an American.

Jl: Yes.

JS: How about your mom?

Jl: Her also.

JS: She's an American also?

Jl: Yes.

JS: And then you were born in Italy?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Why did they go to Italy?

Jl: To take care of my grandfather then when he died they came back.

JS: So how long were they there?

Jl: I don't know four or five years.

JS: Did they live in Rockford also before they went back to Italy your parents?

Jl: I don't remember really.

JS: You don't know where they came from okay so you lived in the United States and Italy and then back in the United States?

Jl: Yes we lived in Pennsylvania and then we came to Rockford.

JS: I have one other question I just wondered how you felt about immigration in this country now the immigrants that are coming in a d there's a big debate now about the legal immigrants on and letting so many immigrants come into this country how do you feel about that?

Jl: Well I don't believe they should have illegal immigrants but it's fine to have legal immigrants.

JS: Open doors?

Jl: Yes.

JS: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

Jl: No