

Valeri DeCastris

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

Valeri De Castris

Jean Seegers: Can I have your name please?

Valeri DeCastris: My name is Valeri DeCastris.

JS: And what relation are you?

VD: I am the daughter of Valentino DeCastris.

JS: And your mother?

VD : My mother's name was Beatrice Patricia Macaluso.

JS: Sounds Italian.

VD: Sicilian yes.

JS: What do you recollect from growing up? Did you visit with your grandparents often?

VD: Yes we lived away for many years. However during my first five years or so of my life we lived with my grandmother as was customary in the Italian community to live with relatives.

JS: Was your grandfather passed away at that point?

VD: Yes I never knew my grandfather. He died in the early 1940s. He died from a simple stomach ulcer. His doctor, who was the physician that all the Italian community visited, Dr. Magnelia, was on vacation and he wouldn't let another physician examine him. He trusted in Italian physician and unfortunately he died from peritonitis from a simple stomach ulcer. So I did not know him but I heard a lot about him from community people because he was quite prominent and active in not only Democratic politics but also in community development and outreach to the Italian community who needed assistance in assimilating to this country.

JS: How old was he when he passed away?

VD: 42,I think and he was, as I understand quite dapper and quite prominent and people to this day talk about him and recall him as a person of importance.

JS: What was your grandmother like?

VD: My grandmother was very beloved by people and loved having people around. She was rumored to be and I would vouch the kindest person you could ever meet. She fed people incessantly. Her dinners were, her house was full of people all the time. People in the neighborhood walked by and as is common in the Italy still they walk all over and there were neighborhood restaurants and groceries and so people were always strolling about and so they were always stopping in to see her or she'd be sitting on the porch with other ladies and people would congregate to discuss the affairs of the city and the neighborhood and the people. Her dinners were multicourse six and seven course dinners and she was an excellent cook and nothing made her happier than to feed people. She spoke many times of how wonderful the United States was and how nice it was. They had a beautiful home, beautiful brick home on Cunningham Street. She also lived with her father, my great-grandfather and his name was Mr. Ludovici, Luigi Ludovici, and they lived also on Cunningham Street.

JS: After your father passed away?

VD: No this was early. My grandmother was born in 1900. My grandfather Ludovici would've come to this country after that. I'm not certain if he accompanied my grandmother. We do have her manifest from Ellis Island and we cannot find my grandfather, Orlando DeCastris' manifest.

JS: What was it like being in a home with her did she teach you a lot?

VD: Well there were so many extended family members around on a daily basis. All the Italian traditions were carried through. It didn't seem to me at all to be an American home except for maybe the TV in the bedroom but the traditions and the language was Italian. The people that frequented were Italian. All the customs were Italian. It really was as if you lifted a scene out of old world Italy in South Rockford.

JS: You have been to Italy?

VD: Yes I have been from Switzerland south all the way to Sorrento which would be the furthest south I've been. You know there were a number of social Italian social clubs in the neighborhood that Italians belonged to. There was a club called the Roman Club on Cunningham Street. There was the St. Ambrogio Club or St. Ambrose which is celebrating its 90th year this year on Montague Street. Our family and that patron saint is from Ferentino, Italy where my father's family is from and that is our sister city with the city of Rockford. There were clubs such as the Aragona Club that were for the Sicilian population, the Venetian Club in our neighborhood on the same block we lived on was for the Venetian community and there was the St. Mary's Society on S. Main St. for I believe the Sicilian population. There was a Lombardi club and the Verdi Club on Madison Street that are still in existence. These clubs were not only social networks for the immigrants but they were a way for them to become indoctrinated to the American way of life. For example the St. Ambrogio Club at the front of the club currently has what is called the Americanization hall. It's a brick building that was actually originally at St. Anthony's Church for the Americanization of the Italian immigrants to learn the language and to learn the customs of the country. St. Anthony's Church is just a few blocks from my home and really was the heart and soul and still is of the Italian community. If you are Catholic and Rockford you have to go to your parish near your home. However if you're Italian from any part of the city you can still go to St. Anthony's Church which kind of bespeaks how important that church was to the culture of the community and it is celebrating a hundred years next year so it's been there since 1909 and it helped form the social fabric with the Italian clubs..

JS: Did your grandmother take you to church?

VD: Oh we walked to church. Yes we walked to church every Sunday and came back to a wonderful Italian pasta dinner.

JS: Was religion, the Catholic faith very important?

VD: Oh my goodness whenever even when the pope even came on TV everybody would have to be real quiet and yes there was a number of religious artifacts in the home and the Catholic faith was very strong, no meat on Friday. Christmas Eve was a multicourse dinner as were many dinners particularly holiday dinners but they were meatless and there were a number of fish dishes served and meatless pasta and I think what's so striking to me about the neighborhood is that it was really heavily ethnicized. You could've walked into that neighborhood and except for the younger generation speaking English and maybe television or more modern appliances than Italy had perhaps in the 30s or 40s and really not known you were in this country. It was really that solid of an ethnic enclave.

JS: Now where did you live you didn't live in that neighborhood?

VD: I lived in that neighborhood every summer virtually and we came there a lot of weekends. I was there enough to where most people think I went to school at St. Anthony's Grade School.

JS: Where did you go to school?

VD: We were in the Quad cities. My father played at the Plantation in Moline Illinois so I lived for about I'd say 10 years outside of Rockford and we returned to Rockford when I went to high school and then in the 1970s when I was in high school the neighborhood was still very Italian and I think continued that way into the 80s.

JS: Where did you go to school, Boylan?

VD: I went to Boylan yes and I went to a few other high schools as well and five colleges but I can't stress enough the traditions that were maintained in the home. My father mentioned some foods but what's now considered gourmet foods were Italian peasant foods, polenta he mentioned as an example. We ate southern Italian cooking and the cooking is regional just like the country is regional because Italy wasn't unified until the mid-19th century. Because Italy wasn't unified for centuries, the immigrants from Italy tended to associate mainly and congregate with people from their own region of Italy. For example the Romans had their own clubs, the Venetians have their own clubs and Sicilians had their own clubs. Sicilians had different traditions than even the Romans or the Venetians and there were differences in the foods and some of the customs as well.

JS: Do you think you could estimate how big of an enclave was that?

VD: Thousands and thousands of people.

JS: On the south side of Rockford?

VD: Yes and everybody had a garden. Everybody grew their own vegetables; everybody knew each other and looked after other people's children. There was no violence whatsoever and the homes were very tidy. There were a lot of flowers very reminiscent of what Italy looks like. Everyone has a garden and everybody has flower boxes. It's very picturesque. My grandmother Amalia DeCastris, Ludovici DeCastris or Molly which is the Americanization of that name she spoke many times about the beauty of Italy as did her brothers and sisters and their spouses that were around our house. All of her family I would say pretty much was in Rockford. All her siblings and they all were in the same neighborhood. They all socialized together.

JS: Did she do you think she missed Italy?

VD: Oh absolutely I think she missed Italy although they really were grateful to be in America because at that time Italy was struggling but they created Little Italy here in South Rockford. There were small grocery stores everywhere. There were taverns. My father's father-- Orlando's-- brother Frank, introduced pizza to Rockford at the Victory Club on Cunningham Street and Dickerman Street and that is recorded in the history books of Rockford. They brought their traditions such as the time after Christmas (Epiphany) where La Befana, which is an old woman who visits the children with gifts. That is a custom that came over. I would say for the most part except for Fourth of July and Memorial Day all our traditions originated in Italy and Sicily. All we did for Memorial Day was go to cemetery and bring flags and flowers and we would watch fireworks for Fourth of July but all of our traditions and our foods were mostly Italian. We spent so much time at our grandmother's house and there were so many visitors that were really not Americanized like you would think. They really did bring those traditions.

JS: Did you see as time went by as you got older some of these traditions got left behind?

VD: They are being left behind because women had more time and they didn't work outside the home and so they had a lot of time to devote to domesticity. For example they all crocheted on lovely, lovely linens and they made beautiful hand-made lace that was in every home and on every pillowcase and on every sheet. Women cooked for days. They made Italian cookies; they made the Italian desserts. My grandmother made everything from scratch and some of my most vivid recollections were of her making pasta by hand and drying it on a table in the basement. There was always a basement kitchen. She often cooked in the basement kitchen because the home did not have air conditioning at that time and she cooked huge meals and people would come from all different homes. The holidays, for example Christmas – everyone, all of the neighbors, all the relatives stopped by at least for a half hour and we would have a little drink of Rosolio Anisette liquor and some cookies.

JS: Now how old were you when she passed away?

VD: I was. I was born in 1956; I was 27 so. Even when I was away at college I called her every weekend and you know I was very close to her. I was closer to her than my other grandmother because I spent more time with her and her other grandchildren were in California until the 70s so she got to know me better than anybody.

JS: Did she ever say anything about being happy that she was in America.

VD: Absolutely. They were very grateful to be here but they always talked about the beauty of particularly Rome and Italy and how gorgeous it was and they always were telling stories of the old country. Men in our neighborhood gathered on street corners and told tales and told stories and played music. My father learned mandolin from the late State Representative Zeke Giorgi's Georgie's father, Gabriele "Gabby" Giorgi because he always played mandolin next-door to us on his back porch so there was a lot of music and big bands in the streets and gatherings where children and families played together. They played games that are still played in Italy where you actually roll this large cheese down the street or Italian card games and they carried on a number of street processions with bands on holidays and saints' feast days, such as the Feast of St. Anthony and Feast of St. Ambrogio holidays that my father mentioned that is still celebrated at the St. Ambrogio Club.

JS: Did your grandmother ever talk about when she became a citizen or when both of them became citizens?

VD: No I don't remember any discussion about that whatsoever or how that went at all. They had to take a test I'm sure and I bet the Americanization hall helped with that. There were always people sponsoring people too and would help kind of shepherd them through the process. There was you know some conflict then as I became a teenager because my grandmother was always asking me when I was going to get married and that I should have a family and marriage and family was the most important thing and I kept going to school and she said how much school can you have and that I should get married. I wore shorter skirts than what was acceptable to her. She would yell at me about that and that my long hair was all over my face or down my back and I should tie it back so there was really a lot of traditional values that were in the home and I think my experience in that neighborhood was like most of the women and the men that grew up second-generation in that neighborhood because it was really authentic.