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Domenico Giunta oral history interview by Gary Mormino and Gayla Jamison, May 18, 1984

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Gary Mormino: Today is May 18, 1984. My name is Gary Mormino, [and I’m] talking to Mr. Don Giunta at his home in Ybor City. Mr. Giunta, you had a few statements you were going to read. You introduce the conversation.

Don Giunta: Let me begin by saying the Italian immigrants who settled in Tampa some sixty or more years ago built homes in close proximity to one another, because in the villages from which they came, they lived in houses that were wall to wall in structure. History tells us that this type of close habitation was made necessary because of frequent pillaging forays by roving bands of vandals, and the villagers found from bitter experience that survival depended on banding together for protection whenever cooperative effort was necessary. The uncertainty of possible harm kept them constantly on alert resulting in their living in communities where cooperation, respect and togetherness was a way of life. This kind of living had existed for untold ages of the past, dating even back to the Middle Ages.

If we keep this fact in perspective, it is no wonder that the Sicilian immigrants who settled in Tampa in particular, but in many other areas of the United States in general, came here to live in close-knit communities where homes were within arm’s reach of each other. Their ancestral fears were still inbred in them, and they stuck together because of a common bond of survival language customs, religion and ethnic and moral values.

The typical immigrant came from agrarian roots, but he readily adapted to the institutions of labor for hire and to work in American factories and industries. The steady sure flow of a weekly income was the realization of the pot of gold at rainbows end that was, for these immigrants, after years of laboring with unfriendly soil and a harvest that was always dependent on the whims of unpredictable weather. Even though the typical immigrant settled in an urban setting, he continued his romance with the soil after settling in America, but with a very great difference, because now he engaged in gardening and farming as a hobby, not a necessity.
It is for this reason that very early homes were surrounded by vegetable and flower garden, a family orchard, a family cow, a small flock of chickens, a backyard bread oven, a laundry shed and an herb garden. Not every home was boastful of each and all of these previously mentioned necessities of self-contained and independent survival needs, but there existed one practice then, shared by all to the very last person, and that was the element of sharing. Sharing that must be spelled with a capital "S".

To prove my point of how the community practiced sharing religiously, let me describe a typical childbirth event. Even though a local midwife took charge of the delivery in the home, three to six next-door housewives assisted before and after delivery for days, and at times even weeks, for mere friendship, never for payment. Not every family owned a cow, nor a lemon tree, nor lemon grass, nor a flock of chickens or honey bees or a complete variety of medicinal herbs, but when need arose, the community never failed to its obligations of sharing, be it a lemon, a bottle of honey, a loaf of bread, a cup of sugar, or on rare occasions, even money. It is this conglomeration of moral and ethnic values, based on respect for the parents—the father as the unchallenged family head—respect for the elders, love and unity for family, respect for honest labor, love for the song and nature, cooperation, togetherness in all endeavors and above all, sharing and the practice of thrift that made it possible for the Italian immigrant to make a success of himself and his family here in America.

If there is any one social institution that the Italian immigrant valued even above love of family, it must be said that that institution was education. Because he came from an agrarian environment and soil-based economy in the old country, a strong back had greater economic and social value than a sharp mind. Simple farm chores required muscles, not brains. The moment that same immigrant was released from the bonds of demeaning hard labor and once he saw that the acquisition of those elements, that constituted wealth, were dependent on an education that required first a mastery of the English language and secondly, mastery of a specialized skill, he proceeded to get it for his children at all costs. It was too late for the immigrant, newly arrived, to share in the wealth inherent in an American education, but he swore to high heaven that that education was not going to be denied to his children and his children's children. In keeping with his promise, we saw a proliferation of first-generation Italian Americans emerge and succeed in all of the honored professions, namely law, medicine, architecture, engineering, art, music, sculpture, and above all, teaching.

I myself am a product of two parents who never set foot within a school classroom, never learned the alphabet, did not know of its existence, but swore to each other that their children would receive an education no matter the cost, no matter the sacrifices. Today, I stand witness to being one of those first generation Italian Americans who benefited from his parental foresight and sacrifices. I am seventy years old, and I am enjoying the fruits of retirement after having taught school in the public schools of Hillsborough County, Florida for a total of thirty-eight years, including ten years as a teacher of adult education.
I attended three universities, namely the University of Tampa, the University of Florida, and the University of South Florida. After seven years of university studies, I completed the degree of Bachelor of Science in business administration, the degree of Bachelor of Science in education and a master's degree in adult education—all this thanks to the foresight of two loving, caring, appreciative, but illiterate, parents. In turn, I have done my duty in continuing the sacrifices initiated by my parents, and that is to educate each of my four children, who are second-generation Italian Americans. All of my four children today hold four-year degrees, three hold master's degrees, and one has earned a doctor's degree.

On the subject of sharing, I want to mention two institutions that originated in Tampa. And I never finished that, but those two are the cooperative grocery store in which fifteen, twenty or more neighbors would put in ten, twenty-five or a hundred dollars for the establishment of a grocery store. Not a dollar was paid in salary. The members participated evenings in manning the store. They purchased all their groceries there at retail. They sold to non-members at retail. At the end of each quarter, they would divide the profits. Honesty was at a height that is unbelievable.

Another example of sharing in Tampa was the origin of the mutual aid society by the Italians, the Cubans and the Spaniards. It was the beginnings of what today is known as Medicare where for a nominal fee, paid monthly, they would be assured of medical and hospital care, and at the beginning, even in their old age, they would be taken care of in the hospitals for the rest of their lives. Today, Medicare put an end to the institutions, unfortunately and they are all going out of business for lack of financing and because of prohibitive cost.

GM: Very, very interesting. You've certainly given us a lot to question and ask you about. May we start in the old country? I'd be interested in your family's background. What about your mother and father's family in la via vecchia?

DG: They were farmers.

GM: Contadini?


GM: And what was your mother's maiden name?

DG: Valenti.

GM: Valenti.

DG: Victoria Valenti.

GM: And your father?
DG: Father, Sabatorio Giunta.

GM: Uh-huh, and he was a contadino in the old country?

DG: Yeah, that’s right.

GM: What about his father?

DG: Sharecropper, you might say. Sharecropper in the old country, because at the end of the harvest, they would each have to give so much of their crop to the landlord.

GM: Landlord. And what village in Sicily?

DG: It was San Stefano [Quisquina].

GM: For both of them?

DG: Yes, both of them.

GM: What stories did they tell you about San Stefano when you were growing up? What’s your image of—have you ever returned to San Stefano?

DG: I was there in 1977.

GM: What was your image as a young child of what Sicily was like?

DG: Well, when I went there seventy-seven [1977], I was not surprised at all with what I saw. My family and the people here had done a very good job of making me understand the hardships that they endured. One of them, for example, was going after water at the outskirts of town from a stream. That was the girls' job in every family. They would have a five gallon or so heavy clay pots and they would carry one on the shoulder. And it was very interesting to note that that same stream—above a certain point, they used it for water, for drinking water and for cooking; and below a certain point, they used that same stream to carry away sewage, and they used similar pots at the end of each day to go and dump it in this stream. That is no longer true in the village where my parents came. They all had flowing water and they all had sewage disposals.

GM: Did you get to see the old homestead?

DG: I did.

GM: Right.

DG: And I understand there was another one, 250 years old, the same walls. The timbers, every so often, decayed, but the walls seemed like they were going to be there forever.
GM: Did you have any relatives in town?

DG: My first cousins. And today they are in their late eighties, the youngest.

GM: Yes, why did the Valentis and the Giuntas immigrate?

DG: Because of hard times. First it was a rebellion that the peasants made against their landlords because of unfair treatment and, just like in many other places, they were the landowners were in power and they were able to incarcerate dozens of these peasants. My father was one of them that was incarcerated for about thirty days in Palermo.

GM: Would this be Fasci’s rebellion?¹

DG: I believe that is the name of it.

GM: Is that right?

DG: And then—

GM: Could you elaborate on that, what you heard about that? This was in 1894, the Fasci rebellion in Santo Stefano?

DG: No, all I recall is that it was the peasants against the managing landlords. There was a period of two or three years where the harvest was unusually poor. Must have been something like this year, which is very dry. And times are very hard; and when you have a bad season, they used to borrow what remains of the lentils and fava beans, and then on the following year you would pay back. But when that carried on for two or three years, they weren’t able even to borrow for seed, because they hadn’t paid the past two years. So, they borrowed some money from relatives and they sought passage and came here. It took them about two or three years before they repaid what they had borrowed in kind over there, which they sent back in money.

GM: How did they hear about Tampa? I mean, did your father ever say?

DG: There were migrations; they came here first in 1900.

GM: Nineteen aught-eight.

DG: And he went back after the rest of the family in 1912, but back in those years, shortly after the turn of the century, there had been other migrations, as early as 1887 to other areas not in Florida, such as Louisiana and places in Pennsylvania, California.

GM: From Santo Stefano?

¹The Fasci Siciliani was a political and social movement in Sicily that lasted from 1891 to 1894, the intention of which was to organize farmers, workers, and miners.
DG: Yeah. And word spread that these people were making a very good living here, evidenced by the fact that they were sending money to their relatives over there. And most of them and well being there, as well as to come over here and just, word spread like wild fire of the wonders of America. And they began to have the courage to migrate.

GM: How old was your father at the age of migration?

DG: Just about thirty-three, I think.

GM: Right, and your mother? Were they married before they came?

DG: Yes, they were married about three or four years.

GM: How many children did they have?

DG: They had three of my sisters and two of my brothers, Frank and Angelo.

GM: Frank—I’ve interviewed Frank.

DG: Half of the family was born over there and half here.

GM: Mm-hm, interesting. Did he ever talk about an individual by the name of Luigi Panepinto?²

DG: Yes.

GM: Do you recall his story about Luigi Panepinto?

DG: I recall him as one who was trying to show the peasants that they were being mistreated and that they had to stick together to get whatever they deserved and because he was something like, I would say, Dr. Martin Luther King here, they assassinated him.

GM: But, he was also involved in the Fasci rebellions. Did your father know Panepinto, loosely?

DG: Yes, sure.

GM: And when he was incarcerated, who arrested him? Do you know anything about it?

DG: The Carabinieri.³

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²GM means Lorenzo Panepinto (1865-1911), who was a teacher, union leader, and socialist in Santo Stefano, Sicily. His political and philosophical views influenced many of Tampa’s Italian immigrants.

³The Arma dei Carabinieri is Italy’s national gendarmerie. It is a separate branch of the Italian military with police duties, and serves as the military police.
GM: And how was he treated?

DG: Well, the accusation was for going against the establishment. These were the charges brought up.

GM: Right, right.

DG: Lies, lies.

GM: Right.

DG: All they did was to get together and march to the federal building, whatever was there, to make known that they were being treated unfairly and Panepinto was just like the Spaniard here in Tampa from Cuba, what was his name?

GM: [José] Martí.4

DG: Martí, and make known the population's wishes. Over there, though, it was taken together with a group that was assembled there and it was a scary tactic, it seems to me, 'cause they really had no accusation and after a short period of time, they were all let free. It was too quiet and brutal to punish you anymore.

GM: What were your father's politics in Sicily? Did he ever tell you?

DG: He was not a politician.

GM: Would he ever describe himself as a democrat, a socialist, a republican?

DG: No, he was not a radical at all, no. He just mind his own business. But he was with a group and he knew when he was being mistreated. And he would stick with the group.

GM: And did you say who loaned him the money to immigrate to America?

DG: Relatives.

GM: Relatives who were in America or in Sicily?

DG: Yes, persons who were already here: some of his in-laws.

GM: There had been—you had mentioned a stream of migration. There had also been one to St. Cloud in Florida. Did he not go to St. Cloud?

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4José Martí (1853-1895) was a writer and political activist who was one of the main leaders of the Cuban War of Independence. He often traveled to the United States and spent a great deal of time in Tampa. Sociedad la Unión Martí-Maceo, the Afro-Cubans' club, is named for him.
DG: No, he came straight on in.

GM: Because he had relatives?

DG: Because he had relatives there already. And that is the reason.

GM: Right.

DG: But a lot of the relatives had already made two or three moves from Pennsylvania to St. Cloud to (inaudible).

GM: What did they have in Pennsylvania?

DG: In Pennsylvania, they worked in the coal mines.

GM: Really. Do you know where?


GM: You're right. Many Stefanazi in.

DG: There were quite a few, yes. So there were several of them made three moves like a checkerboard before they finally settled in Tampa. By that time, the cigar factory had opened and it was such a very easy occupation, just work with the hands, wrapping, making cigars and wrapping them, compared with a doggone heavy hoe in your hand, weighed three pounds so you can see why they all rushed over here and it was job that both the women as well as men could do.

GM: Did he arrive with the family intact?

DG: No, most everybody came with just a few members of the family just to make enough to make some money to go after them or send for them. You found that to be very, very true with hundreds of families. No family, except in later years, came complete.

GM: When he arrived in Tampa then, in 1908, your father—

DG: Yeah.

GM: What was his reaction to Tampa of 1908, to Ybor City, when he arrived?

DG: They found a community that was with open arms, that they were all willing to give them a space in their homes, because for several months that you were unable to rent an apartment, you lived with friends or with relatives. And because they were all very close living, the family split up in about three or four houses and they used to eat at one
particular house. That happened for about two or three months. In the meantime, a house was found and they moved into it. Then within a year or two three of the members of my family began working in cigar factories. In no time they bought that lot two blocks away from here, and for $570, they built a six-room house. So, they became homeowners for the first time in their lives.

GM: Just a few months after arriving

DG: No, it was about a year later.

GM: Right, right. Do you remember any—you weren't born, but from talking to your brother, people in the family, any letters which he wrote home—your father—to Sicily, describing life in Tampa, in the New World?

DG: My brothers, both of them, wrote and spoke Italian, Frank and Angelo, so they wrote—they used to write very frequently and they tell them of how we were doing well, and continuously I remember the letters just getting the good news, which is what we had until the 1930 bankruptcy, of course. Our family lost almost all of our savings that we had made up to that time. Luckily, we had just built this house in 1925—valued as before, or we wouldn't have had the money to build this house—but up to that time, the family was doing very well, very well.

GM: What kind of work did your father find at his first job?

DG: He worked at the railroad tracks.

GM: In Tampa?

DG: Laying ties.

GM: How did he get that job? Did he ever tell you?

DG: There were openings without end. They were laying tracks all over the place. And so, they were in need of labor, and there was always a great lack of it. Then after that stopped, after about seven, eight or nine years, he worked at a dairy for several years, helping out daily. And then the rest of his years were spent in tenant farming, but when cigar factories began to have need for persons to wet tobacco to get it ready for the cigar roll, he used to go to work at three o'clock in the morning to wet tobacco.

GM: This was later in his life.

DG: Later, to get ready for the cigar workers beginning at seven o'clock in the morning, so for about five to seven years he worked at that. Then there was a strike, and during that time he went to work as a helper in a West Tampa bakery, helping bake bread. After that, the rest of his time was spent in labor for hire as a farmer, finally ending in buying some
of the property that he had worked for and farming on his own. By that time, my mother had retired, and—

GM: Let's go back to your mother now. Upon arriving, when did she join your father?

DG: They came together.

GM: They came together. Okay, now did she work or take care of the family?

DG: She immediately went to work in the cigar factory.

GM: Who took care of the kids?

DG: She paid a Spanish woman for that, babysitter. She used to carry two us, one on each arm, all the way from over here to what is the cigar factory, which is where the clock is, right in front.

GM: Regensburg.

DG: Regensburg. She lived about two blocks away from us, so it was very handy to leave us on the way and then pick us up about two-thirty.

GM: She’d leave you where?

DG: At this woman's—

GM: Spanish woman's house, uh-huh.

DG: With my brother.

GM: And she got a job at the cigar factory immediately.

DG: The job was to remove the cigar vein in cigar leaves, stripping.

GM: Stripping, uh-huh.

DG: Making two half leaves out of each leaf.

GM: She was a stripper, then. (laughs)

DG: She was a stripper, which was a very simple job. And compared with the hard work that she had done in Italy, oh, that was paradise, you know. Come home with twelve to fifteen dollars a week and Dad with eighteen to twenty dollars a week and two of my sisters earning eight to twelve dollars a week. My goodness. Kerosene at seven cents a gallon. One light only at night and if one person wanted go to the kitchen, well, everybody stays seated so we wouldn’t burn two kerosene lamps at one time. One person
would hold the lamp all the way to the back. That’s how you make the dollar last, you know, and able to make ends meet, and that’s why they were able to make ends meet.

GM: How did he get the job with the cigar factory? It was Perfecto Garcia then?

DG: Well, as I said, there were more openings than there were workers. That’s why they came from Cuba and from all over by the hundreds.

GM: And she, remain—did she ever graduate to a higher position?

DG: No, she always remained at that factory.

GM: A stripper, uh-huh.

DG: Yes, apparently because she was—the payment went up. She was satisfied with that and she knew that very soon, the family would be able to maintain her at home and as a result, she retired quite early, I believe. Forty-eight to fifty-two years of age. At that time, then Frank went to work at a bank. Angelo had become a master plumber and two of my sisters were working also, and that left only my younger brother and myself in school.

GM: She would have arrived before the 1910 strike. Did she ever tell you about it, talked about that, the strike?

DG: Oh, yes. There were two strikes that they were involved in. One of them they called La Huelga de Diez Meses.

GM: The Ten Month Strike.

DG: That's a long time, you know, not to be (inaudible). Fortunately, my dad was working railroad tracks, but my sisters were without work.

GM: Your mother belonged to the union?

DG: They stayed at home, they just stayed there.

GM: Right, and then she was probably there in the 1920 strike?

DG: That's right also.

GM: She working during the strike in 1931?

DG: No. By then she’d retired. We came here in 1925 and she had already retired about two or more years before we came here. So that makes it about 1923, 1923 that my brothers—that was my brothers' leading ambition in life, to see their mother retired at home. God bless her, we got to enjoy her for a long time. That’s my mother there and that’s my father there. (referring to a photo)
GM: That taken in Sicily?

DG: No, that was taken here.

GM: Here.

DG: Back about 1914.

GM: So you were born in 1914, and you were which child? The fifth?

DG: In the family?

GM: Yes.

DG: Sixth.

GM: You were the sixth child. What were your memories of growing up in Ybor City? What are your first memories of Ybor City?

DG: Of life being very, very slow, though easy-going. And there wasn’t anywhere in the neighborhood—the word fear was never in our vocabulary. I did not hear—my mother used to go to work at two-thirty in the morning to start this stripping and she used to leave in the dark and at times carry one, sometimes carry the two of us, with the bottles of milk that we would be using while we were there for the day. Nobody ever bothered her in all those years, and you never heard of anybody being bothered either. Everybody was interested in just earning a dollar.

Nowadays, I believe the big trouble is dope, because it is an item that you cannot get for your honest labor. You have to get it by paying a price beyond your means and the only way thievery, killing and the like. That’s a big trouble today, I believe, and the answer to our criminality. The cause of it in America is drugs and these people are trying to get it. Even doctors can’t afford it. And the result of this, of course, is embezzlement and thievery and all the rest.

GM: What about your early schooling in Ybor City? Did you grow up learning Italian and Spanish simultaneously?

DG: My brothers talked—

GM: Spanish?

DG: Italian.

GM: Italian.
DG: My brothers taught me Italian, ’cause they went to an Italian school here, which was a settlement by Italian missions who were the church.

GM: Which religion, do you remember?

DG: Must have been Methodist.

GM: Methodist, okay.

DG: Strange, but true.

GM: Right. Now, you mentioned religion. What religion were your parents?

DG: Catholic.

GM: Devout?

DG: Very devout.

GM: Did they go to church?

DG: Not here, but over there, absolutely. It’s strange how once they came over here, because they were in an environment where the people were not too church-going, they only went during religious holidays and festivals and the like.

GM: Were you baptized?

DG: Oh, yes. All of us were.

GM: So you went to the big things, baptismal, burial, things like that, but not weekly service.

DG: Oh, yes.

GM: Did your father ever tell you why he was suspicious of the church here?

DG: No, I wouldn't say that he was, no. Conditions were such that it made it easy not to go. Over there, everybody went, and in other words, you dare not go or you’d be different and you won’t even do what the Kennedys did.

GM: Right.

DG: And so they all went.

GM: Uh-huh. Right.
DG: I think they still do in those villages.

GM: Your brothers went to the Methodist missions, where they spoke Italian. Now did you grow up learning Spanish first because of the Spanish sitter?

DG: No, I grew up as strictly Italian.

GM: And when did you learn Spanish?

DG: After being a teenager.

GM: Really, you didn't learn Spanish up until—

DG: Not earlier. Because as a teenager, then as I started junior high at Washington Junior High, there were almost 60 percent or more Cuban and Spanish, so at lunch time, in the morning and at other times during the classroom, the speech was always in Spanish and I picked it up there. Then I took courses in high school.

GM: Uh-huh. Yes.

Gayla Jamison: Did you learn any Spanish from the nurse that kept you, the babysitter that kept you as a baby?

DG: No, as I recall I must have been too young. She would just give words of admonition. “Stop it,” you know, these words, you learn “Stop it.” And she kept about four others, and she had several baby pens. She had two of us baby penned and the only time she’d holler words of admonition was when we were doing something wrong, fighting or trying to get out or something so there was very little time to appreciate that.

Now, on the other hand, my daughter right now, my eldest daughter, lives in Lutz. She has a family of six children. All her children are at school now, and so this past year she is taking care of the baby girl of one of the schoolteachers that she taught with, and that baby is being treated as if she were her own. The only one in the family, all her children are away from there. My goodness, you ought to see what a beauty she is and how my daughter—she even takes her to the Lutz Library every Tuesday, which is about half a mile away from there, together to join the other children and have these puppet shows and little stories that they tell, you know.

Can you imagine that difference, with me being just put in a playpen early in the morning? And then at about nine o'clock she would feed us one of the two bottles of milk my mother would give with a mixture of coffee and milk, and then about one-thirty or two o'clock, just before Mother's time to pick us up she’d give us the other six or eight ounce bottles, and that was it. Thank goodness it didn't last very long, 'cause I went to school, but there was no way of learning things.

GM: At school, how would the Italians and Spanish and Cubans get along?
DG: It was the Latins. When I say “Latin,” I mean Italian, Spanish and Cuban.

GM: Did you call yourself Latin?

DG: Yes.

GM: Yes, okay, right.

DG: We were all known as Latins.

GM: All right, okay.

DG: By the Anglo-Saxons.

GM: But did you identify yourself as Latin?

DG: Yes.

GM: Okay, all right.

DG: The Latins usually stuck together because they understood, they had a common language, which was Spanish. The Italians spoke Spanish and the Spanish spoke that language so the unifying language of the three nationalities was Spanish, so we were stuck together as a group. So, that made the Anglo-Saxons on the other side of the fence, and whenever fist fights in some broke out, in rivaling and so on, it was always those two factions: the Latins against the crackers.

GM: Uh-huh. (inaudible)

DG: Yes. (laughs)

GM: How about your parents, now? How did they get along with the Cubans and the Spanish?

DG: Absolutely wonderfully. The entire community was running together as one.

GM: We were talking the other day; maybe you could reiterate some of this, about what you remember about your early years when your parents would come home at dinner, and you said your sister was then working in the cigar factory. Can you kind of recreate that setting?

DG: Yes. In the cigar factories, there was instituted the practice of hiring a reader, who was a well-educated Spaniard, and this person used to read for thirty minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the afternoon, followed by thirty minutes of news of the day. And then the rest of the second thirty minutes was spent in reading one chapter of a
book that the general factory members voted on. They were given about a dozen books or novels and they were told to select which one would they want the reader to read for them next, and so they made first choice, second choice, third choice. So that period of three, six and nine months, those three books that had the highest percentage of call were read and (inaudible).

What happened in my family happened in every other family, and that was the members of the family had heard these novels, went home, and made known what the day's reading consisted of, and they were always items of great social value that we appreciate back in those days: love of family, thrift, education, children, nature, love of nature. And each evening my sister used to come home and give us, verbally, the episode that took place. That must have lost it about seven years in my family, up to the time that I became then a teenager and I used to roam around with my gang. I did not have time to stick around the family table after supper. But earlier, we stuck around the family tables thirty minutes or so after supper to listen to my sister give us the episode of the day, and the news that she had heard from the lector.

GM: What was the family favorite? Which story, or which novel, any particulars?

DG: I can’t say one in particular.

GM: How about the—

DG: They were all beautiful, as I recall.

GM: How about the lectores; did she have any favorites?

DG: Yes. There was only one man that broke the Spanish barrier. All lectores were Spaniards, and only one was an Italian, and that was the grandfather of Nelson Palermo.

GM: Onofrio [Palermo].

DG: Onofrio. He was the only Italian lector, because he became from Italy well-versed. And I don’t know whether he applied as a ability for Spanish, but he was able to both speak it as well as write it, and he rose up to that position, which is very, very unusual. He was the only one in Tampa that ever became an Italian lector.

GM: Yeah. What about the meals, for instance, what would be the typical fare?

DG: The what? Back in those days; the meals were prepared as much as a week in advance, and they were quite repetitive. There’d be pasta two or three times a week with different items. One time it would be with lentils. Another time it would be with a vegetable like (inaudible). Another time it would be with beans. Then we would have a meat almost at least twice a week beside the weekends, always on Saturday and on Sunday. Sunday would be meatballs and the tomato sauce with spaghetti; and on Saturday it would be sausage or steak; and during the week, a variety of some kind of
stew. And we would prepare lentils, for example; do you know that lentils are real laxatives? Nowadays, of course, you buy them all ready. You know what lentils are?

GM: Yes.

DG: Back in our day we used to buy them in ten or fifteen pound batches at a time, and they were not cleaned or gleaned the way they are nowadays. Nowadays, I don't know how they do it, but you don't find a stone all. But back in our days there were many stones the color of lentils and the size of lentils, and we broke many a tooth because of that in our earlier years.

So what we used to do is—my two brothers were the experts. Every evening after the story by my sister, we were given a pile of lentils on the table and each of us had to clean our little pile or we wouldn’t leave the table. And we always kept about one or two weeks supply of lentils clean so all Mother had to do in the morning—she used to put them in water and they would soften up. Impurities would come to the top, and she would scoop those off and then right away she would start boiling them. And by the time Dad came, which was at sundown, and the rest of the family was at home, we would have supper just before dark. That was important because in the backdoor open porch and there were no lights, so we would have had to use the kerosene lamp and that was always in the parlor. That was the big place for it. The kerosene lamp was in the parlor.

pause in recording

GM: You were describing the cucina Siciliana of your day.

DG: So, you have the repetitive meals that were planned in advance and have an item that’s for example, codfish.

GM: Baccalà [codfish].

DG: Codfish, and we used to buy it whole. We’d have a nail on one of our kitchen walls and you could snap it on that nail and just cut pieces you want. So weekly we’d have a little variety of codfish, fried codfish, which was a very inexpensive meal but yet it was very, very nutritious.

GM: How much of your diet was supplied by the family in terms of gardening and fowl?

DG: Oh, I’d say easily 40 percent.

GM: Did your mother make her own pasta and bread?

DG: Oh, yes. Many kinds of pastries and (inaudible).

GM: Right. Was Sunday particularly a festive occasion? Did all the family get together or was this just your nuclear family, or was Sunday the big meal of the week?
DG: It was a big meal of the week, but not for eating; just the family ate together except on holidays.

GM: What were the great holidays you remember?

DG: There would be Christmas and New Year and—

GM: Describe a Sicilian Christmas of your childhood.

DG: Well, there would be as many as twenty to twenty-five persons present and we would remain—we would go early in the afternoon in the house that was doing the inviting and we would play cards until two, three o'clock in the morning and then we would walk home. Walk home as much as ten or twelve blocks because that was before the day that the first Fords came out. But in later years, by the time I was a teenager, we had bought the first family kind of car, a Ford, and we were able to remain even later at these family gatherings, because we were a greater distance down from West Tampa to Ybor City. As we visited our relatives, we were able to remain longer hours and go greater distances. We used to have, as a result of that, picnics away from home, such as on the Fourth of July.

GM: Did you typically go on a Fourth of July picnic by your family or with the Italian Club?

DG: At times it would be with the family, but they used to be, back in those days, holidays such as Memorial Day—May 30 [1980] coming up—and Fourth of July and Labor Day. There used to be a Ballast Point over here at De Soto Park when they had the casino and a dance hall and picnic grounds, and the streetcar used to be a nickel. Ybor City and West Tampa Beach had bands in which members participated just for the fun of it and so these two bands would take turns and have dance music and the public would dance for free. They were in the city proper, civic parks. Those two places were two areas that for years had this kind of big community picnics.

GM: Right. Going back, we were discussing Christmas. What was associated with Sicilian customs of Christmas? For instance, did the Befana come to Ybor City or not? Are you familiar with Befana?

DG: No.

GM: The Sicilian witch that leaves the coal in the children’s stockings. That must be.

DG: We used that in November 3.

GM: Oh, is that on Epiphany, also?

DG: You’re right.
GM: That should be (inaudible).

DG: That’s where we go (inaudible).

GM: What about food stuff? What was unusual about Christmas in terms of the way your family ate? Anything special?

DG: They would begin two to three weeks prior to the holiday in making pastries that lasted, because it was before the day of refrigeration and there had to be pastries that lasted, sugar, and they kept well. And then, of course, there would be a great variety at the table, enhanced by things that the family grew by way of fruits, nuts, such as pecans, and other things that were purchased. Peanuts were always another item that were roasted and were present with chestnuts. A carry-over from Sicily, things that—

GM: Of carry-over holidays, did you ever celebrate as a boy the Festa di la Santa Rosalia?

DG: I believe that’s what you called Madonna della Rocca.

GM: She came out of the (inaudible).

DG: Like it

GM: Similar, similar to the (inaudible).

DG: Yes.

GM: You give, you remember that?

DG: Yes, there was a church to which we went to before we move over to our place because they tore it down. Right across from Garcia's (inaudible) Services, used to be called (inaudible) Church. A grocer a block away from here went to Italy in the early 1930s and brought back a replica Madonna della Rocca which is from Alessandria [della Rocca]. He was a (inaudible) from Alessandria and he donated to the church. And every year after he brought it, on that particular day, the community, especially the churchgoers, would get this Madonna—which was, as I remember, about three feet tall—at the head of the procession, and they made the rounds in the neighborhood here about ten or fifteen blocks, go around and take her back on the pedestal on the outside grounds of the church. That continued till the old man, Mr. Beneditto over here, died. He was a profound religious man, and he brought it and donated it to the community. That was our involvement in outside celebration. That was the only one.

GM: You also mentioned earlier the Italians in particular were frequently moving out to East Ybor City, and you are obviously an example of this. Have you any idea of the
patterns of which Italians moved from Central Ybor City to little Italy section to this area where we are today? This is around Eleventh Avenue and Twenty-Fifth Street.

DG: I believe the reason for their moving is they became more financially independent and they began to appreciate spaciousness and living the way they had lived back then. And again, I’d like to have you see, the only—look at this block. That’s typical of (inaudible) Ybor City. That's what Tampa used to be like. You see the houses just arms length reach of?

GM: Mm-hm.

DG: They used to hand over a cup of sugar across, and hand over vegetables and whatnot. They needing a lemon or a few eggs, they can reach right across that way, so they appreciated spaciousness. That doesn't have much space either front or back. And so they bought one or two lots, and they built the center of it up to one side of it and they began to have gardens and a playroom from what they remembered they did in the old country. You see?

GM: Give us an example of how your father bought this particular lot.

DG: My father had worked for some ten to twelve years or more for this medical doctor, who owned about forty acres of this area. At that time, it was one giant farm, before it was subdivided into streets and lots. And when the doctor retired, he decided that he wanted to get rid of his farming interests, so he divided it into blocks, cut out streets, and began to sell lots.

GM: How many acres were the lots?

DG: Eight lots to every block measured an exact acre, each lot being 50 by 100 feet. He encouraged his former employees to purchase acreages of his property, which my father did.

GM: We were discussing the Italian transition in farming. Your father was approached by the doctor to purchase some lots—

DG: My father purchased an acre of the ground that he had previously tilled for this doctor.

GM: This was what year and at what price?

DG: Nineteen twenty-one.

GM: And do you know how much?

DG: He paid five hundred dollars per lot.
GM: Five hundred dollars?

DG: Per lot, per lot. No, per lot.

GM: Really, so that was eight lots, four thousand dollars an acre.

DG: That’s right.

GM: Seems like a lot of money.

DG: Yes.

GM: Okay.

DG: He began to farm it on his own. He went into the business of raising vegetables and produce and retailing it himself.

GM: How would he do that?

DG: He had a horse and wagon.

GM: And some strong sons.

DG: He delivered to stores. He sold to individual families in the streets of Ybor City.

GM: Did he specialize in any one vegetable?

DG: No, it was a variety of trucks.

GM: Uh-huh. Right. And did his sons help him?

DG: Only weekends. By that time—well, the young ones, my brother and myself, the two youngest ones, we were with him continuous after school. My two older brothers, they already were working by that time, one in a bank, the other as a plumber. And they helped out for filling in orders on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays. The farm was a way of keeping us together, more than we would have had otherwise than if we would have lived in the city.

GM: Was he able to make a living as a truck driver?

DG: Yes. With the help of the rest of the family being engaged in other endeavors—say, two brothers working at those two jobs, my sister working at the cigar factory, Mother taking care of the home by that time and helping him out.

GM: What about payday? What would happen on payday? Where would the paychecks go?
DG: My brother was a family banker.

GM: (inaudible)

DG: And every Monday meant going to the bank and make a deposit.

GM: Everyone turned the check in to your brother, no cuts off the top?

DG: And they kept whatever was necessary, but it was really something you don’t see nowadays in families. “What I earn is mine and don't you dare touch it, but yet, you’re going to give me food and quarters as long as I live.”

GJ: Did you get living allowance? Did you have some money of your own in your pocket?


GJ: Well, where did you spend your money?

DG: I didn’t find much use for money, even in high school. I used money to buy the streetcar fare. I took lunch from home. Once in a while, I would buy me an ice cream cone after lunch, but it was frugality that is unbelievable right now.

GM: You mention that your father did not have an education, nor your mother, yet he became a retail truck farmer. How did he acquire the—

DG: Value of money?

GM: Value, that’s right. Accounting.

DG: That is something I wonder to this day. They could count numerically from zero to a hundred, both of them. They did know the existence of the alphabet but yet they knew all of the denominations of money and they could give you an accounting of five, six or seven items that my mother was going to buy at the store. She was able to tell you that it was three dollars and twenty-five cents faster than I can put it down on paper and add them. It’s unbelievable, the way you depend on the mind more than on the pencil.

GM: Scores of other Italians imitated your father in this—you know, the great vegetable empires: the Valenits and the (inaudible), Zambecos and the Gualliardos. Could you comment on that? Were you observing them as a young man? Did the truck farmers, the dairy, things such as that?

DG: Well, each of those were able to find an outlet for their product, whatever it was, dairying, poultry raising and the like, because the community of Tampa in general was being so thickly populated that people were interested in making money and not raising
their own. So, there was a need for supplying this demand, and so arose the bakery and the dairymen and the vegetable farmer and the grocer, and many of the other little private family industries that arose as a result of that.

GM: Why the Italians in particular? Why did they do this? You don't find many Spaniards and Cubans in the same enterprises.

DG: All right. The ones who began to operate the dairies was because they were shepherds in Italy. The ones that opened up stores here is because, like the Pizzos and Castellanos, four generations back they were store owners in Italy, and so it’s continuation. My father was a peasant, and he continued that over here. But in doing so, they never lost track of the importance of an education in this (inaudible). “You do not do as I do. I have to do this because I have to. But you don’t have to and you can do better, and I’m going to see that you do better because I’m going to give you an education.” And he did that. Like many other hundreds of families did the same.

GM: Could you elaborate on that? Exactly what his attitude was toward education in his children, in terms of what kind of jobs did he want you to go into?

DG: No, they left that up to us, but they realized that if you had an education, later you could step into anything you wanted by continuing an education which is what happened in our case. No, they did not direct us into any one channel. They knew that education in general would help you go wherever you wanted to go, that the sky is the limit if you want to continue.

Mp3 file 1 ends; mp3 file 2 begins.

GM: Well, we haven’t discussed the role of the Mutual Aid Society yet. What are your earliest memories of L’Unione Italiano?

DG: That they satisfied both a cultural, social, recreational and medical need, all through those years. And it was the only way to acquire all those things. It was the unified cooperativeness by the payment of a small monthly fee. My mother-in-law went to pay hers this week at the Italian Club. The dues are nine dollars and ten cents for a month, and that gives, I believe, a right to three dollars a day for every day that she's hospitalized, in cash payment, besides the use of the hospital plus all medicines and all hospital care. But the doctors will have to be paid by her. It's separate. Course, now with Medicare, which pays 80 percent, and if she pays only 20, it's just a pittance by comparison.

GM: Your father belonged to L’Unione?

DG: Oh, yes. The families—mine as well as all of the others—before they ever bought a loaf of bread, first they paid their dues, and they instilled in their children the importance of paying those club dues, ’cause they never knew when they might need it. And children grew up, and I grew up that way, appreciating that fact. And now of course you have
Medicare and with all kinds of insurance supplements that you have, the clubs don’t have that importance. One by one—it’s a pity—they’re all dying out. So I hope that one of these days some way will be found of preserving the Italian Club building for cultural purposes, even though the other part may die out completely—you know, the medical care part.

GM: The year you were born, the original Italian Club burned. Do you remember the present club being built as a young boy? You would have been three years old.

DG: Oh, no. Never.

GM: Do you remember? You obviously would have gone over there right after it opened. What did the building seem like to you as a young boy, going into the Italian Club?

DG: To tell you the truth, the difference exteriorly, there’s no change at all as far as I can remember in the exterior.

GM: Well, what struck you about that building as a young boy? Did the building impress you?

DG: I used to go there for movies. Ten cents. And they used to have vaudeville, showgirls, dancers, like that Jackie Gleason—

GM: Were the movies in English or Italian?

DG: No, they were always in English. Always. Now, once in a while—

GM: Would your father take you there to the club to tag along?

DG: No. Beginning at age eleven on, I used to take my younger brother, two years younger, and go. Every Sunday afternoon about two o'clock they had matinees. For a dime you could get in, see a show, and then see vaudeville for the next half hour, and it was a real hour and a half or so of true clean entertainment.

GM: Now, did your father—would he go there at night with the other men, you know, maybe to—

DG: My father was not one to socialize that way. I believe one of the main reasons is he used to be so tired from his work that he had to be ready to get up early in the morning the following day, but these persons that worked in the cigar factory, they got off at two-thirty or three o'clock. They went to work at seven or eight, and naturally the work is light: in the shade and come two or three o'clock in the afternoon. All they had to do was take a shower, eat, and naturally take a walk and socialize.
GM: That just reminded me of a question. Did your father ever—what was his attitude toward cigar workers? What if you had told him, “I want to be a cigar maker”? What would he have said?

DG: He’d appreciate it, because he himself worked for a time in cigar factories. His job was carrying the tobacco from the warehouse over to these women, like my mother. Each of them had a barrel out of which they’d split the leaves, and his job was to get the tobacco and carry it to these different persons. And that was done very early in the morning, the wee hours of the morning, between two and five. So, he had his share of working in a cigar factory.

My mother did, my sister did and my eldest brother Angelo, who left it because of the strike. He noticed that may have continued on several other future occasions, so to get away from it, he decided to go and learn plumbing. That’s what took him away from the cigar factory; otherwise, he would have spent his lifetime there. And it was in good fortune, because he became a plumbing contractor. And then after high school, my youngest brother went in business with him, and he became a master plumber and now he’s head of the plumbing at Beulah [Baptist Church] for the Hillsborough County, my youngest brother. So, they each did well for themselves, but they all had a taste of cigar factory except my brother and I, my youngest brother.

GM: Right.

DG: So, my father had high respect for the cigar factory, because that is the beginning of their American life.

GJ: Some people say that the cigar workers were very capricious about going on strike, that if the mood fitted them to go on strike, they would go on strike. Did your father ever talk to you about that, or your brothers or sisters (inaudible)? Would you say that’s true or not?

DG: I don’t think there was ever unanimity in any group that goes on strike, but I believe the cigar factory workers were pretty well united in the moves that they took. I believe they were from what I recall of my family.

GJ: So your family—

DG: They were pretty loyal people.
GJ: —felt that the strikes were motivated, that they had good motivation, legitimate reasons?

DG: I always believed, and my family made me understand, that they were for very good reasons.

GM: Many people would suggest that, for instance, if the tobacco was too brittle one day, the union steward would yell, “Pater la calle!” everyone would just go out to the street. Do you remember any examples of that?

DG: I recall that in some factories being a real poor, poor material. The cigar owners tried to make a bigger profit by buying cheaper tobacco and expecting the workers to produce the same finished product, which you cannot do unless you have a very beautiful Havana wrapper, see? And so when the foreman would go to the employee and give him the devil for not producing, all they could do is, "Well, give me better materials and I’ll give you a better product." So they only thing they could do for them is, in frustration, leave the darn seat empty. They’d strike. And if other factories were not guilty of that same infringement, of giving poor materials, still they, because they were all very jointed and closely-knit, they went on strike to protect this factory's five or six hundred or eight hundred workers

And sometimes there was something over there. That owner did not want to have the lector anymore because he said they had caused the workers to lose their attention to their work, and even though they were paid by the piece. So maybe the demand was so great they felt the cigar workers could produce even more and for that, I recall there was a strike also once for removing the lectors. That was a big blow to the cigar factory workers, for many of them, that was the only doggone education they had. You know, especially my sister, for example, never having gone to school, but man, what an education it was to her and she was able to give—you the names of a dozen authors and their books just like that, and yet never went to school, never read a book. She only heard. She only heard by listening.5

GJ: Well, it's said that the cigar workers had great appreciation for culture, for music for art.

DG: They surely did.

GJ: Where did that come from? Where did they get it?

DG: I believe that’s a very interesting question. Hard to answer, but I tell you one thing. The Centro Asturiano, which is still existing, that club on Nebraska [Avenue] and Palm

5He is referring to the 1931 strike in which all cigar makers in both Ybor City and West Tampa were forced to remove the lectors from the factories.
[Avenue], they brought here some of the world's greatest singers, including [Enrico] Caruso, [Amelita] Galli-Curci, and many of the others.

GJ: (inaudible)

DG: Yeah.

GM: Tito Schipa?

DG: Tito Schipa. And the Italian Club brought some too, and yet we’ve never been able to do that since then. I believe one reason is the T.V. and the radio and the movies and commercialized entertainment has put an end to that. Back then the phonograph had just begun and very few families owned that back in 1920, 1925, and so things like this, persons had already started making pretty good money and they were able to attend these functions. They were appreciative of culture. They appreciated music, they appreciated art and singing and all kinds of fine things. They appreciated fine clothes too and they used to wear some of the most beautiful clothes back in the twenties and the thirties. They had the money and they showed it on their person.

GM: Speaking of clothes and finery, courtship is an interesting pattern in Ybor City. How did one go about dating when you were a young man? A young (inaudible)

DG: Courtship would begin usually, as it frequently does, at place of work. Back in those days, in the twenties [1920s] and the thirties [1930s], one of the best source of finding a wife was the five and dime stores. We had Silver’s, McCrory’s, Kress’s, Grant’s and two or three others that employed just dozens and dozens of girls between the ages of fourteen and nineteen or so and the young men would just stream from counter to counter and make eyes. And then following that, beginning about ten-thirty, followed the dances at the social Spanish clubs. Almost every Saturday night the girls would rush home, go and doll up and with their mother or their older sister or an aunt, always with somebody as a chaperone. They would go to the dance halls and there, the young man that had been going eyes and (inaudible) behind the counter would meet her a second time, and then the following week, again.

Within a few months, courtship had begun and then, if you were interested in the girl, you always asked for her hand in marriage by going with an adult, usually your father, your mother—or if they are not available, an uncle or an older brother or sister—and you would make previous arrangements that you are going there to ask for the girl's hand in marriage. And naturally, because they had already directly or indirectly known the individual or seen him, they were ready to give an answer. It was just a formality. If the person was not going to be accepted, they would have told the girl to let go again long before they would have said, “Come and see us.” So by the time they did go, it was already—
GM: What about the different attitudes between the Cubans, Spaniards and the Italians? Would you say they all looked upon courtship the same? Or were some fathers more strict than others?

DG: I have reason to believe that the Italians were the strictest of the three nationalities. I’m saying Cuba, Spanish and Italian.

GM: So, that’s what I’m saying.

DG: I had reason to believe, from what I recall.

GM: Did Cuban women have a reputation for being a little lighter than the others in terms of—

DG: Yes, that’s true.

GM: In terms of dating habits?

DG: Yes, they started dating without, and going places without chaperones, earlier than the Italians. I believe the Italians started in greater numbers when the girls started going to senior high school. I’d say in the thirties [1930s] they started going in large numbers to the senior high schools and so naturally there, with the social activities, it didn’t call for no chaperones and families, whether they liked it or not. They couldn’t take their daughter for example, or the young man, to a damn football game or to a pep rally. So, gradually, then the automobile had come in to use and families let go of their children. To go to a school function even though after the function was over you go fifty miles away in the dark, in the eyes of the neighbors and everybody else, it was okay because the daughter left. “Where’s she going?” some grandma would ask. “She’s going to a high school dance,” or “She’s going to a high school football game.” Oh. And here was “Oh, permisimo,” see.

GJ: How long would this engagement last? I want to get back to marriage.

DG: Usually nine months to a year. I don’t think I’ve ever—serious cases never lasted more than a year. They’d make plans early.

GJ: Always a year or nine months.

DG: Once they got the so-called family permission, an admission to the family, they would start setting a date within six to nine months thereafter.

GJ: And what was the wedding like? Usually in a church or the courthouse, or was there a party or reception?
DG: As I recall back in those days, church weddings were not as numerous as they are today. To me, today it seems like they appreciate church weddings more, girls do. They prefer a church wedding than a home wedding.

GJ: Is that your wedding picture?

DG: Yes.

GJ: And where did you marry?

DG: I was married at OLPH church.

GM: Our Lady of Perpetual Health.

DG: Yes, down the street.

GM: Is your wife Italian?

DG: Oh, yes.

GM: What was her maiden name?

DG: (inaudible)

GM: (inaudible) What about your brothers? How many of them married Italian brides? And your sister?

DG: All of them.

GM: So they all married Italians. How about your sister?

DG: Also (inaudible) Italian.

GM: She remained true to faith. What about the wedding ceremony? What was the festivities like? Did they sing "Cella Luna Mezza Madre"?

DG: They would have, naturally, the relatives, numbering several hundred frequently. There would be a big barrel or two or beer in the backyard, and everybody just feasted on roasted peanuts and a variety of candy, which back then was twenty-five cents a pound, today two dollars and thirty five cents a pound. And beer.

GJ: Was there any cake? Or was that a—

DG: The cake, then, later in the evening was the center of activity. It was passed around to everybody.
GM: What about funerals in Ybor City? Do you remember any funerals, going as a young boy?

DG: Yes.

GM: What was the funeral like in Ybor City?

DG: One of the most impressive was one of the last funerals I recall, and that was the funeral of a certain (inaudible), the founder of the Testa-Secca bakery, great-grandfather of the great artist [Joe Testa-Secca]. The funeral home was at the building which is still there, the corner of Ninth Avenue and Seventeenth Street, across the street from the phone building there. Right now there’s a concrete block building, white, that is used as a rehabilitative center facing Ninth Avenue. That used to be the Italian school that my brothers attended, same building. And right in the corner was—which is now a lawn—there used to be a funeral home.

GM: Run by whom?

DG: (inaudible) and Fernandez, and before him, used to be for many years. Now, a typical funeral back in the twenties [1920s] consisted of having the casket in the parlor of the home of the deceased. Then when the time came, those who were better able to afford it would have the Ybor City or West Tampa respectively—over there, the West Tampa band; over here, the Ybor City band. They would be in the lead, and they would play mournful music on foot. The only ones liable to be hired wagon-drawn wagons; what you call those things?

GM: A hearse, cortege.

DG: Yes. Nowadays they are Cadillacs owned by the funeral homes, but back then they were owned by livery stables, not by the funeral home, and you would rent one of these for ten or twelve dollars and split it with five or six people who would ride with you.

Now, this particular funeral of Testa-Secca proceeded north on Twenty-First Street to two blocks north of Columbus Drive. Up to there, it was paved, but then from there over to the Italian Club Cemetery was nothing but dry, ugly sand, ten or twelve inches deep. So what they did was, the band would stop playing there and disband, and the wagon—the hearse—with the coffin would proceed by itself, and all the others would alight because the sand was too great for them to negotiate it with the horse and carriage. They would walk back of the hearse. Used to be about eight or nine blocks from there to the Italian Club Cemetery, which is on Twenty-Fifth Street. So from Twenty-First to Twenty-Fifth is four blocks, then from Seventeenth to Twenty-First, it was four more blocks; total of eight blocks they walked.

That was the funeral back in the twenties [1920s]. After that, of course, came the automobile, and they had Cadillacs that were rented to individuals for that purpose.
Funeral homes had their own, six or eight of them that they rented out to families to (inaudible).

GJ: Did people make speeches at the funeral?

DG: Pardon?

GJ: Were there speeches made at the funeral?

DG: I believe back in those days they did, more than nowadays, especially when a businessman died. They always had a word to say, especially because he belonged to clubs, and the club had the secretary, who was usually a pretty good orator, and as a family respect, they gave a short talk for the individual

GM: In light of that, that same question, when you were growing up, who were the elite in the community? What individuals held the most power? For instance—let me just name a few people and you can comment on the role. John Grimaldi, Giovanni Grimaldi of the bank.

DG: Individuals such as that, the reason why—the Licatas and the Lecarres. The reason why they were able to wield power and authority is because they did something the rest of the community—they were able to speak English. And whoever was able to speak English, all the rest of the community went to them for help to read a letter or to have the simplest of contracts explained or to draw up a contract, the simplest of things that nowadays anybody can do. But back then, the number of persons that could speak English was so limited that in Ybor City, those were about the two big ones, Lecarre and Grimaldi. In their time, then they became Italian counselors. So, naturally, they were in a great way able to help. The Italians were calling members of the family to come over here.

GM: Now, they also were politically involved, particularly Licata's son-in-law, Nick Nuccio.6

DG: That’s right.

GM: What about the role of politicians in early Ybor City?

DG: Because the average immigrant that had come here did not speak English and depended on these families, naturally, when it came time to vote, in exchange for the favor, it was a foregone conclusion that you owed them that at least. A vote doesn't cost anything. Say, “Sure, I will vote for whoever you say.” So they became pawns and in so doing, they started wielding tremendous power.

6Nick Nuccio (1901-1989) served two terms as mayor of Tampa, from 1956 to 1959 and from 1963 to 1967. He also served on the Tampa City Council and the Hillsborough County Commission before being elected mayor.
GM: Everyone seems to have a Nick Nuccio story. Do you have one?

DG: No. Nothing other than that he was an honest politician, the likes of which I don't think you'll ever see again. The ones nowadays seem to be crazy for money at all costs, and Nuccio seemed to have been satisfied with a salary.

GM: Did you ever, for instance, go down and see him at Cuervo’s, crossing the Italian Club in the morning where he usually drank coffee?

DG: No, I never did, but I worked for a time after graduation from college before going into teaching, while I was waiting my first teaching assignment. I worked for the state welfare board during the day, the WPA, Works Progress Administration. And my job was to certify people for jobs if they had no income and to find out what skills they had, and I gave commodities—sugar, mattresses, pillows, bed sheets, potatoes, rice, flour—to these people who were in need. So, they came to me to be certified and after an interview, I would decide what their needs were, and I'd go to their home and investigate to see if the conditions were the way they said.

Nuccio, back in those days, being a county commissioner, had many persons that he owed favors to, because they were heads of families that could bring him thirty, forty, fifty votes or more; or they would associate in the clubs and there they would make friends with many others, so he owed them a favor. So he came to me and requested that I help him out, and so we carried on a lasting relationship, which was until I got my teaching position and I left the job, because it paid sixty-seven, seventy-two dollars a month. Teaching paid about a hundred and twenty-five, and it was the beginning of a career I wanted to follow. I knew that this was a welfare job, that any day it would fold up, which it did about ten months after I left it. So, Nuccio would send me people continuously and I, in all honesty, carried on interviews, and they were all very needy people. There's no doubt it. Times are hard. They didn't have any income, and so I certified them and helped him out. And of course, we became godfathers to each other and that relationship.

[Transcriber’s note: The audio ends at this point. The rest of the transcript is taken from the original draft used by Mormino in writing *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*.]

GM: You were explaining how you acquired an education and your career choices.

DG: My two older brothers were instrumental in getting me to acquire a college education. They appreciated the fact that, having had to leave the home at an early age, and not continue higher education, to help support the family, that need was no longer true with them both working, and they definitely wanted me to enter one of the professions.

GM: And you graduated from high school what year?
DG: I graduated from Hillsborough High School in 1932.

GM: What did you think at that time in 1932, in the midst of the Depression? What was your career ambition?

DG: It was to go to the University of Florida to study, to be a teacher, but times were hard. The banks had just failed two years before. All the family savings had been lost. The University of Tampa had just opened in Hillsborough High School, having evening classes as a junior college, so as an alternative, I started taking classes there evenings, starting about four o'clock in the afternoon until ten. By the time I finished my first year there, the city had given the junior college acquisition of the old Tampa Bay Hotel property for a dollar a year, and the university began as the University of Tampa. I moved there the first year that the University opened 1933, I believe it was, and I continued studying there and taking courses summers at the University of Florida to expedite my four-year degree.

GM: You went up to Gainesville?

DG: Summers, yes. Used to go there—

GM: What kind of teacher did you want to be then?

DG: Math and science.

GM: What did your father think about that?

DG: I had lost my father in 1930. Two years before, I was a freshman in high school when he died. I fell in the hands of my two brothers, as concerned by future. They were my two fathers.

GM: Your brothers were in the plumbing business then?

DG: One a plumber, and Frank a banker.

GM: A banker?

DG: Yeah. Frank had taken accounting, and he began getting jobs with bigger advancements. Word spread of how good he was, and banks began to fight for him.

GM: Okay.

DG: When he left, he already was heading of the bookkeeping department at Citizens Bank. And when the bank failed—and then from there, of course, he liquidated the Bank of Ybor City and after that, he went to the Massari Bank

GM: Angelo Massari.
DG: Angelo Massari, who had very high respect for Frank and he was rising through the ranks of the Massari bank when together with his in-laws; they decided that they should go into the grocery business on Elm.

GM: This is the Grecos, right?

DG: That's when they first opened up that first unit known as the Big Barn, and it met with such a great success that they started a chain that became a wonderful family. It had almost four units by the time they sold out.

GM: Kash 'n' Karry. So, your brothers helped you through college.

DG: Had to.

GM: And when did you graduate? When were you graduated?

DG: First time in 1936. Then I completed my other degree in 1938.

GM: Did you find employment immediately in 1936?

DG: I had to wait about one semester.

GM: What was your first job?

DG: West Tampa Junior High.

GM: And give me a thumbnail sketch of your educational experience in the schools?

DG: I taught there at West Tampa Junior High, started teaching general science and math in the eighth or ninth grades. From there, there was an interruption because of World War II. I had taken courses in electronics, so there were openings at the Tampa shipyard, and when school let out in 1943, I went to work at the shipyards installing communications equipment on board ship. Then when September rolled around and schools were opening and I tried to leave, the shipyards and the draft board said, “You cannot leave; your effort is greater there than in the classroom.” And so they kept me there until the end of the war. Of course the salary was about five times greater, and there were times (inaudible) that I worked seven days a week, sometimes forty-eight hours a week, five or six straight Sundays. And it was almost a nervous breakdown that I suffered from overwork, but all these ships had deadlines to meet and when a ship was to be gone.

For example, by August 15, they would tell me what electronics equipment had to be installed and what units by a certain date. And because the men were not always reliable—I send two men down to work, and I'd go back to check on them and they were shooting crap. I’d leave another man to do another job at one end of the ship. I’d go back to check on the work to see and the spotlight that had been installed, and he had gone to
the restroom, which was at the other end of the yard, and he would go naturally the long way around, you see. If we had left at ten o'clock in the morning, by the time he got there it was lunch time, so he'd take his lunch hour and then he'd come back by about two o'clock. Then at other times, there were all kinds of entanglements of killing time which are sickening to me.

I was there, sincerely, to win the war. I was trying to speed things up, and that’s the reason why in no time, in three months time, an employee, as an apprentice, I was raised to foreman, without favoritism or nothing. It was just the fact that my work was so fast and so appreciated that management was interested in pushing me up. In no time, I found myself there, but my biggest kick was the men that I had were not up to what I expected. They were slowing down production continuously.

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See if you can tell what that is.

GM: Oh, my. (inaudible)

GJ: It's beautiful.

DG: Make believe that you're in a Georgia plantation back in 1875, underneath the tree of the magnolia tree. What is it?

GJ: It’s a mint julep.

DG: Mint julep. (laughs)

GJ: Like back in Georgia.

GM: Regarding the war, and I know you're going to give me a kind of a word association thing. Where were you December 7, 1941?

DG: I was at home in the kitchen. And on the radio on top of a refrigerator, I heard the news. That was 1941. Invitations had already been sent out the Friday before for a December 21 wedding, so I rushed over to my in-laws, my future in-laws, to ask them what should we do, and we decided that we would go ahead with the wedding as planned, which we did. So, on Sunday the twenty-first, which was the beginning of the Christmas recess, we were married in church and then the reception at her home. We had already paid and planned for a honeymoon to Havana, Cuba, and we went on the last trip of the steamship Florida, because on the return trip, they dismantled everything. Our last meal had to be eaten standing up, because it became a troop carrier. They dumped us in Miami and it left for wherever it was—New Jersey or someplace—to be outfitted with guns to enter a convoy to carry troops overseas.

GM: What was the reaction of Pearl Harbor in World War II in Ybor City? People milling in the streets, or—?
DG: They were all united like everywhere else for the war effort.

GM: What about another day, V-J Day? What was Ybor City like on V-J Day, [August 14] 1945?

DG: Well, they held all kinds of celebrations. The clubs used for dances and there were parades, and the other big celebration was when Dr. [Frank] Adamo returned from the Pacific after having been a prisoner of war. By the way, he's a great lover of my vegetables—

GM: I've interviewed him also.

DG: —and with his nephew who comes frequently. I send him—

GM: They call Adamo in Tampa, though. It’s really Adamo.

DG: Adamo. Dr. Adamo.

GM: Sadly, many people think that World War II was also the apogee of Ybor City, that after the war, things began changing. Young people began moving out. Do you agree or not? When did Ybor City really begin to change?

DG: I believe the war may have had something to do with it, boys coming from overseas had traveled and begin to get ideas about moving away from home, and that brought about a little bit of looseness in the family to some degree. But we have to add to that commercialized amusement came in, and came TV, came radio, came color TV, came the movies and the outdoor movies, the drive-in. All those contributed towards taking the boy and the girl away from the family unit. Entertainment no longer was like it used to be, where there would be a party and then you would have it at home and invite your cousins, and two or three musicians were in the family. Never paid, never, and they would just play on a Sunday evening or Saturday night into the wee hours of the morning and everybody would enjoy themselves. Then it all became commercialized.

You know, the very unusual thing about the entertainment at my wedding was that when I started teaching at West Tampa, in my classes I had boys that were musically-minded, and I had about twelve or more that played a variety of musical instruments. And just for fun, they used to get together in various homes, and they’d just have serenades and enjoy themselves on Friday nights or Saturday nights. Then, whenever there was a birthday in the community, they would all get together. Then they joined the school band and they became even more experts at their instruments.

So, by the time I had taught there—1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, that was about four years—came the day of my wedding, and naturally I invited all of my previous pupils that I was in touch with, as well as all my students I was teaching. And one of the boys, as a surprise, one day he came and says, “Listen, you will not hire any music for your wedding because I've arranged to have music for you.” And so at my mother-in-law’s
house, nine of them showed up, and they played some of the most beautiful Italian music that you could ever imagine.

We went on our honeyoon and we returned back, and one Saturday, shortly after our return, my wife and I had just gone to bed, about eleven-thirty at night on a Saturday night. We heard the banging of car doors along this street here, first one, then two, then three, then four. So, we peeped through the venetian blinds and we noticed one guy with a guitar, another guy with another musical instrument. They hunched and they ran across the street running toward the front. So we made believe that we were sleeping, and I realized immediately what was going to take place. And there again, they surprised us with the most beautiful serenade, all my former pupils that you could ever imagine. Things that you can never forget.

It'll never happen again, because—for example, I tried to—being a lover of nature, I used to have a 4-H Club before buses, at Franklin Junior High. And after school, I would take them on field trips: one time to a chicken processing plant over here, another time to a nursery. Then I would distribute the other. We were about twelve to fifteen members, each of them as interested as my own children in 4-H Club work. So I used to go and distribute them home, some of them as far away as (inaudible). Some of them (inaudible).

But then busing came. And what about busing? Well, as you know, the bus is there ten minutes before school begins. We used to meet a while after school in my 4-H Club once a week and then talk about the different projects and go and visit the different pupils and check on their projects. But with the coming of buses, the bus is waiting. Within five minutes after the bell rings at three o'clock, they had to be in their buses, seated and moving. So that killed my 4-H work.

I used to have a science club. I used to have a photography club. And I used to meet on different afternoons for an hour. At West Tampa, I used to go back over there, 'cause the janitor lived in the building, and my classroom in the dark became a perfect darkroom for developing. So in my experimental table that I used between the hours of nine and eleven, I did then have four or five girls. They were members of the group. I had a club of about twelve or fifteen. The boys would walk home. It was seven or eight blocks away. In the neighborhood they all walked, but the girls, I would take them in my car and distribute them home. Their parents would be waiting. They knew where they were, 'cause I had gone after them, or some of them would bring them to me at school, and frequently the janitor would go with me to deliver these girls. The kind of set up that's impossible to do anymore.

Then, I used to have the oven back here, used to have wiener roasts on various occasions and I would invite my club members and the parents would bring them, and the parents would come pick them up. I was never able to do that again then with busing. It just tore up the love between the teacher and pupil completely. And in my opinion, it destroyed the complete educational process.
For some pupils, I taught them more after school in this environment than I did in the classroom. I used to have individual boys that were a horror to other teachers and teachers would come to me and say, “Listen, how does that boy behave with you? ‘A’ in conduct? You mean to tell me he does work in your class?” Yeah, he does. He belongs to one of my clubs and to belong to a club, he had to be perfect in scholarship as well as in discipline: scholarship in my class, but good discipline in all the other teachers. So this particular boy was making poor grades in some of their classes, but he had to be good to be in my clubs, and the teachers were wondering how come. Well, when you get a pupil away from school and are able to talk to him, it’s different than a classroom environment. And I straightened up many a crooked boy that way, all through my clubs.

For years I had those two clubs, photography club and science club. And pupils are just today, as I meet them forty years later says, “You know, the biggest thing that ever happened to me was your letting me to be a member of your club. It changed my outlook of education.” And I can see where it does. (inaudible)

GJ: (inaudible) and the effect that that had on the neighborhood?

DG: It was as if an atomic bomb had hit Ybor City, that’s it. It just demolished all the houses and nothing came in its place except the empty lots that you see today.

GM: Who’s to blame? Who do you blame?

DG: The federal government didn’t have an answer. They thought that by removing old homes, they would be removing a blot, but they didn’t realize that it would be scattering the neighborhood and destroying all these things that we’re talking about: neighborliness, cooperativeness and love and respect for each other, ethnic values, which have been gone to winds forever. It can never come back. I’m saying that it can never come back, because now with the second or third generation children, speaking various languages—many of them three, as I do—and many of them having a good income, they don’t depend on friendship. They don’t have to. The dollar will make as many friends as you care to, and that’s too true nowadays. Too many of them are now making good money and they find commercial amusement at the expense of family amusement, and the family has just been torn away. But I don’t think we’ll ever see it the way we used to.

GM: How did the Giuntas remain in Ybor City? You're certainly unusual in that sense. Most people left. Why did you remain behind?

DG: I believe my father is to get credit for that. He sort of planted us here by having bought this property.

GM: How do you relate to it now? The neighborhood's obviously black now. What similarities do you draw between the black population in Ybor City, and how well have you gotten along well with Afro-Americans in the area?
DG: Absolutely. Always have. The respect they have for me, of course, is based on service. Here, for example, is that colored boy came over. He had not received his income tax refund and he wanted to know how come, so I wrote a letter and I wrote his address. I stamped the envelope and I gave it to him. Many persons come to have insurance items read and letters read, and I never charge them a single thing. They come for notarization papers. I never charge them. So, I’m in a way a given service, and I have very high respect from them. I believe if I were to walk down a dark street and a half a dozen others were to follow me, I would be the last one to be hurt, because one or other has been serviced by me and (inaudible). And that’s been for years now. For years I've treated them like that, and they appreciate it.

Then, with the vegetables, there’s no one that ever comes to purchase something that does not receive something as a gift in his turn. Now, where does that have its beginnings? Here's a story on that. I had an uncle that had a little grocery store on Twenty-Second Street and Ninth Avenue, and he used to come and give me his horse and wagon weekly orders, like on a Tuesday, and he would deliver them to us on Friday when I was a child four or five years old. And when he got through writing down the several items that my mother was ordering, he would turn to me, ’cause I was always at my mother's apron, listening, and I admired the old man.

I always used to walk to the wagon. He used to give me a ride for about a hundred feet then get me off with a little two-wheel, four-wheel wagon, like doctors used to use back in those days, (inaudible), run back home after getting that little ride, for several years. I recall that he used to ask me—after he took my mother's order, he said, “Now, what do you want?” And so, naturally, I would want a cookie or a cracker or something that I had seen at the store when I had gone there, chewing gum.

Sure enough, when my mother's order had been distributed on a table from special baskets that he used which she returned back to the store—he used those baskets over and over again. They were made out of spindles like that chair that I got. So then, he would always have at the very bottom, hidden, and he would say, “Let me see. Didn't you order something from me, I think?” I said yes, (inaudible). “Yes, I believe I remember now,” and somewhere in that little basket would come—it was a little pretty bag, all twisted, and he would bring it over to me so I never forgot the beauty of giving something for nothing. And to all these people, I’d give them something extra cause they buy something and they'd appreciate it. You go to the grocery store, (inaudible) pizza, for the past thirty years, I’ve yet to have a (inaudible).

And I tell you something else about it. Every time that there's something new like this, we (inaudible). Say this is a gift to you and your wife. And every time there's something new, like and they are very scarce. Best business, purchase a bunch. Here, for you and your wife. I have yet to receive from that man the first penny of merchandise. Why are people that way, Doctor? I don't understand it.

GM: (inaudible)
DG: I hope my son has (inaudible), because it’s beautiful thing to give something like that. Giving. The Bible says it. My church preaches it. It is greater—what is that word? It is greater to give than to receive? It is more blessed to give than to receive. I’m a believer in that, and if I don’t give more it’s because I don’t have more. But gosh, how I would enjoy giving more if I could.

GM: And in conclusion, in fifty years, what do you think Ybor City will be like?

DG: I believe that a lot of the space which is now vacant, which was previously occupied by homes, will find a variety of businesses which will cater to the public in general, not necessarily those in the immediate community. Just like—for example, today I go and buy pizza at University Mall, so I believe people from Carrollwood will come to Ybor City and buy things like (inaudible) has to offer, or cacciatore: merchandise that is not easily available in all parts of the city. And Ybor City could begin to attract products and merchandise that the public from faraway places will be glad to make use of. But I do not believe it will ever be a residential community as in the past.

GM: In a sentence or two, what should Ybor City be remembered for? You know, you’re a historian. Capsulize it in a sentence. What was Ybor City about? How would you explain to an outsider?

DG: I believe the Ybor City community should be remembered for having proved those values which were held up so religiously by the immigrants coming here, but not having been able to put them into play because of financial ability. And when they came over here to the New World, they were finally able to prove that with a bit of financial help they could attain all of those values that they believed it. Number one, education and a good livelihood.

GM: Very well, it has been most enjoyable, most enjoyable.

DG: I’ve enjoyed it, so any cooperation I can give you in the future.

GM: Ni gusto.

DG: I’ll look forward to seeing you again.

*End of interview*