YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Niles Firebrick Project

Niles Firebrick Company

O.H. 1606

LORENZO RUSSO

Interviewed

by

James Allgren

on

December 14, 1993

O.H. 1606

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

NILES FIREBRICK PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: LORENZO RUSSO

INTERVIEWER: James Allgren

SUBJECT: Niles Firebrick Company

DATE: December 14, 1993

A: This is an interview with Lorenzo Russo for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Jim Allgren, on the Niles Fire Brick Company Project, on December 14, 1993, at 2:45 p.m.

Lorenzo, how did you come to Niles?

R: The reason I came to Niles? My mother was here first. She called me and my father to get over here.

A: When did your mother come here?

R: In 1953.

A: What was it that brought your family over to Niles to begin with? Your mother came first. . . .

R: The reason why my mother came first was because her father was There, then he went back to Italy. Then he was a citizen of the United States. The citizenship of my grandfather, that's

how we got here.

A: How old were you when you came to the United States?

R: Sixteen years old.

A: You were sixteen.

R: It was November 5, 1954.

A: What I'd like to talk to you a little bit about first is. . . I'd like to ask you what kinds of things you remember about the old country. Tell me about where you were from and what you remember about it.

R: After school, I used to want to learn how to be a tailor. I used to walk to do that. Right after school I would go to the shop where they made suits. I wanted to learn how to be a tailor. In class we had two goats and we used to make milk. We used to go pick the September chestnuts. For two months that's all we did--pick the chestnuts. I would carry a fifty pound bag on the shoulder for three miles, back and forth from downtown.

A: What would they use the chestnuts for?

R: After we dried them, we sold them to somebody that was a corporation. They would buy them back.

A: Just for the purpose of the record, the village that you're from in Italy is Bagnoli.

R: Urbino is the county.

A: What were some of your memories about the village itself? What was it like to grow up there?

R: It was hard work. [There was] not too much food either. We used to work on the farm and collect all the food. We would bring it into the house. In the wintertime, that's all we were going to eat. We just stored all the food. We used to make our own oil. We used to have one pig, and before Christmas we would butcher the pig. The lard off of that pig,

that's what we used to cook. We used the lard to cook.

A: Everything was self-sufficient, basically. It was basically a farming village?

R: Not everybody had a farm. The majority of the people, to some degree, planted their own food, yes.

A: What sort of job did your father have while you were there?

R: He used to work with a company that made furniture.

A: Like a cabinet maker?

R: Yes. He was a manager there. They used to make these big trunks--I can't think of what they're called. They would bring the logs [tree] down, and the people go skiing . . . they use it to go up and down. It's the same thing, but I don't know what they call that.

A: They would send the logs down a slope?

R: Yes, 12 miles down.

A: Lumberjacks.

R: Yes.

A: You were still in Italy during the war years?

R: I remember that. I was about five years old. I remember little kids like me, they would die right in front of me. I remember one night, it was just starting to get dark. I was in front of the door in the kitchen. I looked outside and saw all kinds of fireworks. I went into the kitchen and told my grandfather, "Come see the fireworks." It wasn't fireworks. They were singles, they started shooting. My grandfather went to the front door to tell everybody to run underground. Before we got underground you could hear those shells coming in, whistling at us. We went underground at night.

A: The war was going on at that time, obviously, but, what were some of the more pleasant memories you have about growing up?

R: During the war, I was small when the American people came in. I've never seen a gun in my life [before then]. They gave me clothes. I was so small, all the stuff they gave me, they couldn't see me in the bottom. They almost dragged me home.

A: So, you have some good memories of the liberation?

R: Oh, yes. I remember three days later we went back in the house again. They started shooting again, so we would run to go hide again. Then, a plane crashed right in the mud.

A: Wow. Was it a big plane?

R: It was a big plane. It was a Trojan warrior. It was bad, real bad. I had never seen one like that before, no way.

A: Is there anything more about that you can remember?

R: I was small, and when I found out that my grandfather was a citizen of the United States, my cousin and I asked my grandmother to go get the citizenship. She had a suitcase with two locks on it and she didn't want to open it. It took us two months to convince her to go get the citizenship. Finally, after two months, she got the papers for us, because my mom needed the citizenship to go to the council in Naples that filled out the papers, that way she could come here first. So they did that and she was able to come over first.

A: That's very important. I'm glad you brought that up. So your mother proceeded your father and yourself?

R: My grandfather was already over.

A: Did that cause many problems because he was a citizen, that he had gone back? When did he go back?

R: I don't remember. He went back and forth more than one time.

A: Did that cause many problems once the war started?

R: This was before the war.

A: But when the war was going on, he was actually in the United States?

R: Yes.

A: Okay, I see. Which grandfather was that, your mom's dad?

R: Yes.

A: I just wanted to make sure of that.

R: When my mother came over here right before I came over, my father used to work. My mother used to write me letters from the United States and I was to open it. One time I read the letter saying that she was coming back, so I closed the letter. I didn't want my father to know that I read the letter. So I wrote a letter to my mother saying, "Before you come over, leave the United States, and then you come back." What happened, my father and my mother decided to leave everybody here and didn't leave anybody in Italy. So they decided that we were all coming over here. I had three sisters and another brother. I was the oldest in the family. So we came over here and met my father. My mother rented a place for $40.

A: Where at? Here in Niles?

R: Yes, in Niles. My mother was working at Youngstown, Ohio Tile Supply. [She worked for] 32 cent an hour.

A: What kind of a job was she doing there?

R: Cleaning. What's the name of it? Youngstown Tile Supply? I don't know if it's still there or not. She used to wash all of the clothes. It was a big place, just before you get downtown. If you go [Route] 422.

A: Youngstown Tile?

R: I think so. That's where she worked.

A: I'll look that up. I do recall seeing that. She had been here for about a year before she. . . ?

R: Yes. About a year and a half. So we got a place. We thought, "What are we supposed to do?" We couldn't find anybody that was telling us what to do. So I found out there was a restaurant--I knew the guy that had the restaurant. He came over in the boat at the same time that I came over in the boat. I didn't even know he was coming over into Warren. When we were in the boat, we would play cards. In New York when we got off [of the boat], we said, "Good-bye." He was going to Warren and I was going to Niles, and we didn't know how far away those places were.

A: That's fantastic! You're practically neighbors!

R: I found out that he was working at Cafe 422. One man, I told him, "If you want to take me to over there. . . ." I found out he was over there. His uncle owned the restaurant, so I asked him if I could come in to work. So I went to work there.

A: Working as a busboy?

R: No, I was a dishwasher. After I did that for three months, the bartender was taking me back and forth to work.

A: You were getting rides with the bartender.

R: The bartender took me back and forth. Then, I felt sorry. The guy did me a favor for too long, so I went to buy a bicycle. I went to buy a bicycle downtown over here. I had $20. So I gave him $20 for the bike. He told me I could pay him a little bit at a time. He charged me $80 for the bike. So the first day I went to work in the restaurant, I called the cook. I said, "Look, I got a bike. Now I can come to work with the bike." The cook came and said, "How much did you pay." I said, "$80." He got scared when I told him I paid $80. He never told me why. Then I told another guy, and he looked like he got scared when I told him $80. Then I found out the guy [who sold me the bike] cheated me. You know, [it was] 1956, and he charged me $80 for a bicycle. You know what I did? I didn't pay him anymore. The owners of the place where I bought the bicycle kept sending me letters saying they were going to take me to court. I said, "Okay.

Take me to court." So they took me to court. I brought my interpreter, no lawyer, just an interpreter. I won the case, because they never sold me the bike. I kept the bike for $24.

A: Which was a fair price, actually.

R: Then I found out that they were cheating me like hell.

A: They were trying to take advantage of you.

R: So, I went to work there with the bicycle. Then I got another job over at the same place. I started at 5 o'clock, worked from 5:00 p.m. washing dishes. From 5:00 p.m. until 2:30 a.m. in the morning I mopped the floor, cleaned the place up.

A: So you were doing double duty.

R: Sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, no day off.

A: You didn't seem to mind?

R: No, because I had my sisters and brother. I had to make enough money to pay for the trip to bring them over here. So when I made enough money, we called my three sisters, my brothers, and my grandmother, who was 75 years old.

A: Was this your mom's. . . ?

R: My mother's mother. She was 75 when we brought the kids over.

A: When did you bring them over? How long was it before you got the rest of the family over?

R: I think it was in 1964 or 1965.

A: So, it was about nine or 10 years before you got them all over?

R: No, no. I'm wrong. It was 1959.

A: Now, you had three sisters, and how many brothers? One brother?

R: Yes.

A: What were their names?

R: You want the names?

A: Yes.

R: Maria, Angie, Lucy, Neil. Do you want my grandmother, too?

A: Yes, let me have that name, too.

R: Angeline.

A: Out of the five kids, where do you fit at? Were you the oldest?

R: Yes, I'm the oldest.

A: So that gave you the responsibility . . . you were the number one son. . . .

R: Well, my father got a job. I helped him out. When the kids were old enough, they would run to the top of Mason Street. That's where I bought the home, so we would all fit in there.

A: Did you buy the home on Mason?

R: We rented the home. We couldn't buy coal. We didn't have enough money to buy coal, so we cut woods. We put wood in the coal furnace. One day, we had to get another house. There was too much smoke in the house. We couldn't see each other. [Laughter]

A: Were you cutting the woods yourself?

R: Yes, me and my father used to cut woods. We used to walk down on the tracks. We would find a lot of wood in the boxcars. So, that's what we used.

A: You were talking about how the guy tried to cheat you about the bicycle. How hard was it for you to adjust from living in Italy to coming to the United States? What kind of problems

did you have?

R: After the cheating with the bike, I had no problems after that. Of course, see, I have to tell you about school. I have to tell you about that.Me and my buddy, he's my brother-in-law right now. His name is Angelo Frasca. We decided we were going to go to school and learn something. We went to Washington school, and they put us in the ninth grade.

A: They put you in the ninth grade, so you were sixteen years old.

R: He and I sat at the same table. We were the only ones who couldn't understand the words. At 12 o'clock they used to take a break. We used to go to the front of the school and play soccer, my buddy and I. Everyone would laugh at us. We used to kick the ball. At that time, nobody was kicking the ball.

A: Right, exactly.

R: They would laugh at us. Then they started calling me a Dego. Then I started to get into a fight.

A: Did that happen a lot?

R: It happened a few times. You know how they change class every hour? One day, two weeks later we were in the hallway and forgot what room we had to go in. We went down the steps. That was our school. We graduated after only two weeks. (Laughter)

A: Did you have a lot of problems with the language at the time?

R: Oh, yes.

A: The reading and writing?

R: We could write in Italian, but we had a hell of a time. .

A: You couldn't write in English?

R: Yes.

A: How did you ever get over that if they weren't getting it across to you in the schools?

R: What I did when I went to work for Packard, I bought myself a book in English. So I started to learn some of the words by myself. I started going home and [before] sleep after work, I took a shower, laid in bed and [read]. A couple hours a day. . .

A: You were just studying?

R: Just studying a couple hours a day. I couldn't afford to go to school anymore because, you know, my brothers and sisters. . . . So, I kept working. The machines were running at work, so I was reading. After the bike--I got rid of the bike--I got a car. I bought a 1951 Pontiac.

A: What year was that, that you bought the car? Was it in the late 1950's?

R: It might have been in the 1960's. I think it was 1960.

A: This was after the experience with the bike?

R: Yes, I got rid of the bike. So I had a 1951 Pontiac. I had never driven a car before in my life. So I went into the lot. I asked them how much they wanted for the car. They never asked me for a drivers license, never asked me for nothing. They just told me that it was $150. So I gave them the $150, and they gave me all of the papers and everything. I went in the car, and I didn't know how to start it. I didn't know what the key is or nothing. I asked the guy, "You've got to start it for me at least. I want to see how it sounds." So he came over, and I watched him, the way he started it. So I got in the car, and it was about three miles away from home. It must have took me three hours to get home. [Laughter] So I took the car home.

A: That was ingenious.

R: The next day, I went to the park with the car. I drove around and around the park. I wanted to learn how to drive and keep

going. Two weeks later I started going to work with the car. I went to work at Packard. It was an afternoon turn. I started at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I left at 12 o'clock with the car. I was late. (Laughter)

A: So, it took you over four hours to get there. What was the hardest part, handling the shift?

R: No. It was an automatic. I never drove. I was afraid I was going to hit somebody.

A: So, you're just taking your good old time.

R: I took my good old time. People were blowing the horn, who cares. I didn't care that they were blowing the horn. [Laughter] So, I kept driving like that for about two and a half months. Finally, the cops got me. They took me to jail, and I told them, "You can throw me in jail all you want. I'm going to go to work, because I have to feed my family." I explained everything, and finally they agreed with me. They said, "You've got to keep learning to drive, you've got to go to school. What time do you want to go to work?" They said, "You follow us." I had to follow the cops all the way down 422. They didn't give a shit what happened after that.

A: They were almost giving you a police escort.

R: I followed them all the way to 422, then they let me go. (Laughter)

A: That's wonderful.

R: I scheduled to go get my license. Wouldn't you know, I got the license the first time [I tried].

A: Really?

R: They gave me two pieces of paper. I didn't know how to read. There were blocks, so I just marked in the blocks. I guessed. I got a 100 percent.

A: They often say that's's the best way to take a multiple choice test.

R: I just guessed. So, I got a 100 and a 90 percent. So I got the license, and I drive.

A: I wonder what they'd say if they knew that you did that. That's funny.

R: So, I rotated turns at Packard. One week afternoon, one week they'd give me night [turn]. Of course I helped my parents, and they bought a home after that. They bought a home, and I helped them out.

A: That's quite an accomplishment to be proud of.

R: I got married when I was 24 years old. Then I bought a home for myself. I paid the home off, and I have three nice kids. And I've retired.

A: You've done very well for yourself.

R: I've got no education. I think I did pretty good. I have pride in myself and what I did with no school, nothing.

A: I think you should be [proud].

R: Do you want me to tell you about that?

A: Yes, sure. Tell me about when you got married.

R: We got married on July 16, 1962.

A: Where did you meet your wife at?

R: She came over the same time we came over. We knew each other from kindergarten.

A: Really?

R: Yes. Her parents and family were all here, and when she came over in 1958, we started going steady.

A: It's almost as if, it was beyond families coming to Niles. There were whole neighborhoods. I see. So you knew her ever

since you were kids back in the old country. That's fantastic.

R: We were neighbors. We got married in 1962. The first year, she had a miscarriage. She lost one kid. In three or four years, we lost five kids. The doctor told me that she couldn't have any more kids. What happened then, the first thousand dollars that I saved, I put into Xerox [stock]. Xerox was at 1 and 7/8. When I found out that my wife couldn't have anymore kids in 1965, I sold Xerox and made $7,000 out of $1,000.

A: That's a good profit.

R: I took her to Italy. I blew the whole $7,000 on [the trip]. The doctor said we couldn't have anymore kids, so I said, "Fine." We came back from Italy after four months vacation, and she got pregnant. We had one kid, then we got another kid. Then, we had another kid.

A: Just going back to the old country. . . .

R: I was so mad. I was ready to kill the doctor. (Laughter)

A: But, you might not have known about it.

R: Yes, but if I would have kept Xerox until now, then $1,000 might have been $2 million.

A: Yes.

R: But the kids are worth more than $2 million.

A: It's almost as if you took the money, went back to the old country and worked a little magic.

R: That's what happened. She relaxed, and got pregnant. That is how she had the kids.

A: You grew up together in the old country. I'd like to talk a little bit more about what it was like to grow up in Italy.

R: Do you want me to go to a young age?

A: Anything at all.

R: Well, I loved the festivals they used to have. They had a lot of festivals.

A: What kind of festivals?

R: They usually had some horns. I forget, because there were so many.

A: All of the time they had them?

R: Yes.

A: What sort of things were there to do at these festivals? Was it much like the ones that we have here?

R: No. They used to build a car out of wood. They used to load it up with all firewood. They had wheels on the bottom. You know the picture I showed you earlier?

A: Yes.

R: All of the people were standing all the way downtown. The guys that pulled the cars all of the way around on those wheels. . . . The firecrackers kept blowing up. They would keep going until the last bomb exploded the whole car. Then they used to have big, long tables. They used to have a "Who's going to eat the most spaghetti" [contest]. They'd put the table up high, so everybody could see those guys when they eat. They had their hands tied behind their backs, you know. There was all the spaghetti you could dream of, and a glass of wine. If they could drink the glass of wine with no hands, they would give them a prize. Then they had another contest where they had a pole. It was probably about 15 feet high. All kind of prizes were at the top of the pole. And the pole was all grease. The guy that got to the top got all of the prizes. There used to be hundreds and hundreds of guys that would go one foot, two feet, three feet.

A: They had all kinds of competitions like that?

R: Then they had these clay pots. They were hanging up on the poles all of the way across, maybe twenty or forty [poles]. They used to blindfold the guys and give him a cane. Some pots had water in them, some pots had money in them. The kids like us were young, we couldn't wait to see that.

A: It was an important time, yes. How about school in Italy?

R: We used to go to school--number one, you had to knock on the door. As soon as you came into class, you said, "Good morning teacher." If you were late, you might as well go outside, and get a handful of gravel, and get in the corner, because you would be on your knees for four hours.

A: So you had to kneel on gravel for four hours if you were late.

R: In the corner of the room.

A: That seems kind of harsh these days.

R: Well, you weren't late after that no more. [Laughter] If the teacher saw you downtown walking around, they wanted to know what you were doing, especially if you don't do your homework. After school we had to go to church, and the church used to be a pass. The next day, we had to tell the teachers that we were there.

A: So you had to go to the church after. . . .

R: Yes. Sometimes you just walked to school, and sometimes you found the teachers and you weren't sitting in your seat, they would ask you a question. "What's 6 times 5?" You better answer them.

A: They would give you a pop quiz.

R: Yes. That's as soon as you came in. If you don't answer. . . I think they used to keep us going all of the time. They never changed class. We had the same teacher all year. For first grade we had one teacher, for second grade we had a different teacher all year. You would go from one room to

another. No sports. After school, it was over.

A: They saved all of the sports for. . . .

R: Sports were outside. We played soccer.

A: That was fun and games?

R: There were no sports in school. Over here you have bands in the school. We didn't have any bands in the school. Teachers, they were tough. Now I'm realizing they were tough. They used to get mad. They used to have these ladies that would come into class and tell us a joke, so we would keep quiet and stay there. When I used to be late, I had to go on my knees. The teachers, they didn't come out yet. There was a lady there, and so I would jump through the window, and the other kids used to follow me. We would leave. (Laughter)

A: Why don't you tell me about your job at Packard, how you got in there and that sort of thing.

R: How I got in the job? When I was in the restaurant, I mopped the floor and washed the dishes. I started to learn how to cook. Every Wednesday, one guy used to stop in to eat. He wanted me to cook his steak. I used to cook it in garlic and wine. He wanted me to cook the steak.

A: Because he liked the way you did it?

R: Yes. For a long time, I cooked the steaks. Then they asked me, "Do you like it over here, washing dishes?" So he gave me a card and said, "Go over here." I didn't know where Packard was at that time. So, what I did was, the next day I got on the bike, and rode to Warren on the bicycle. I found an old man and showed him the card. I tried to explain. He waved his hand and told me to follow him. So I followed him all the way to Packard's office. It was nice of him to take me. So when I got to the place, I gave the card to the girl. The girl said, "Go take a physical across the street." So I did, came back, and the guy said, "Can you go to work today?" I said, "I'll go to work tomorrow." "Tomorrow," [He asked]. I said, "Yes. I want to give the

people that I work for [now] a chance, a week or two. . . ." It took me a long time to explain it to the guy. He said, "Okay, give them the two weeks or whatever you want to." So I gave them two weeks over there where I worked at the restaurant to make sure they found somebody in my place. They couldn't find anybody. So, I went to work at Packard, and just mopped the floor over there, and washed the dishes until they found somebody. After another week, they found somebody to fill my place.

A: So you kept. . . .

R: Both jobs until they found somebody, because I didn't want to mess them up. They were nice enough to give me a job there, so I did that. I went to work at Packard. After eight months, I got laid off. I went back to the restaurant, and they said, "You can start now." They gave me a job right away, washing dishes. The same day I came from work--I was coming from Packard--I stopped and told them that I got laid off. They said, "You go and wash dishes right now." Then, when they called me back, I went back to Packard. It was a few months, that's all.

A: What was your first job when you were in Packard?

R: I swept the floor. I would sweep the floor in so many departments. After that, I went to running a machine. The machine had different strengths, the wires. It had different gages, 18 volts, 20 volts, 40 volts. You would put so much strength in, and the machine would twist. You made so many feet of wire in eight hours. From there, I went to another plant at Packard. I ran the high lift. From the high lift, I figured with the politics, I would run for the election. I won the election.

A: That was in 1970.

R: That was in 1970. I didn't have to work anymore. I just represented the people everyday. At the first of the year, I started to file a grievance, and the foreman tried to make an ass out of me. I filed a grievance, and he told me that I spelled it wrong. "You don't need the `u'. You need an `a' over here." He told me this in front of the boys I

represented. I told him [the foreman] that I would be right back. So I went into the office, me and this boy. And I wrote the grievance in Italian, and I brought it to the foreman. The boy laughed like hell, because he was on my side. The foreman made an ass out of me, you know what I mean. He made me look like shit, because I can't spell. That boy didn't know whether I was educated or not. I tried, alright. So, I wrote the grievance in Italian. The foreman said, "What am I going to do with that?" I said, "Well, maybe you don't need the `u'. Maybe you have to put an `e' at the end." (Laughter)

A: That's beautiful.

R: I laughed at a couple of the employees and said, "What do you think?" The employed told me, "I think you did a good job." After that, the manager found out what I did, so he had a meeting with all of the managers that represent all of the departments. The general foreman told this foreman, "Whenever Russo makes a mistake, never tell him that he made a mistake. He'll write it in Italian, and we won't understand. Then, we'll have to get an interpreter."

A: The guy was nitpicking?

R: All he had to do was pull me on the side and tell me, "Do you want to learn this? Here's what you've got to do."

A: He intentionally tried to make an ass out of you.

R: Yes. He tried to make one out of me. He shouldn't have said it in front of the employee representative, you know what I mean. So every year we had an election. The next year, and for 21 years, I won the election. I never lost one.

A: What do you think made you so popular?

R: What I did, in the morning when I came in the plant, I said to the first employee I represented, "Good morning, how are you? How's your family?" Then I would go to the next one, and the next one. It took me everyday about four and a half hours to talk to most all of the men, go around and ask

anybody if they needed any help. I asked the company if they needed any help, too. I asked both of them, because I had enough time, eight hours every day. Sometimes these old machines would break down all of the time for the superintendent. The superintendent said, "What are we going to do with this machine? We need a new one." I said, "If you go back and check all of the money that you spent on the old machine, you could have bought two new machines." So, not too many people did that. I respected and represented both sides. There's two ways to get to people in Youngstown. We've got the workers and we have the company. Without a company, we wouldn't be there, and without us, the company can't be there. A lot of people didn't like what I used to do, but I believe that I did the job right. I did the job the way I believe it to be. The people, on both sides, liked me. They didn't like it when I left because I helped a lot. Sometimes, employees got a lot of calls from home. I used to sit there and listen for hours to the some of the problems. I used to talk to the people [about their problems]. There was a husband and wife that used to be so bad, because they couldn't pay the taxes. What I did one time, all the employees, one by one, that I represent . . . every week they would give five dollars for each of their kids and twenty dollars up for themselves. Some of them did right away what I told them to do, and some said, "I'll do it next year or next month." But now, sometimes me and my wife will be walking through the mall. A woman grabbed me and kissed me. My wife was wondering what [was going on]. She said, "If it wasn't for your husband to start the credit union, my kids would never have the $1,000 in the bank."

A: You took a very deep, personal interest in what everybody did.

R: Well, yes. That's good life. I don't know why people fight and argue.

A: What was it that inspired you to get involved in the union?

R: Well, it was the guys and the kind of job they were doing.

A: You thought they were being ineffective before?

R: I didn't think they were doing the right thing for both sides. I always believed in both sides, the company and workers. Without them you've got nothing.

A: There has to be a partnership.

R: The only way is you've got to be working together. They [should] give good money when we do a good job, and respect us. Sometimes in the company, you've got nobody to respect the people. For the last 10 years, management didn't respect anybody. The foremen and the floor workers, they paid the guy off the street that didn't know anything about it. If you work at Packard for 10 years and some guy comes from the street to be your foreman. . . . If you used this tape for 10 years and you know every button on this tape [player], and some guy comes from outside and says, "No, no. You don't do it that way. You do it the other way." They used to argue, and then they used to call me. I had to get in and explain exactly what it was they were supposed to do. Out of it all, I've learned something and will remember it until the day I die: the best thing to do for the employee and for the foreman. . . .

A: Is to keep everybody happy? And keep everything running smooth.

R: That's right. If you keep everybody happy, they make good a production. If you make everybody pissed off, you have a family of red tags.

A: They didn't really seem to feel that way before. You thought that was a pretty big flaw at the time.

R: Oh, I fought the red tags ever since I worked there. Sometimes the foreman used to take a red tag, he used to kick them in the ass. Then they'd go and complain to the boss and say, "Russo kicked me in the ass." He called me in and said, "Can you explain why?" With a red tag, you ship them out. After you ship them out, they cuss because they don't like you sending them out. So why do you put a red tag there? If they were good, you wouldn't put a red tag on them.

A: So what did it mean when you put a red tag on them?

R: Red tag means no good, they were scrapping.

A: They were scrapping too much stuff? There was a lot of waste going on in the company?

R: Well see, a lot of times it's not the company, it's the people running it, the foremen. He wants to look good on the paper at the end of the day. Good or bad, it doesn't matter, just so long as you've got big numbers on the paper. So what happens if it's all bad? What's good if they just put the numbers there? It looks good for the next manager who looks at the papers. Well what kind is it, good or bad? And you've got to go look and see if it's good. Before I left, we got straightened up good. Packard Electric has picked up now for the last eight or nine years. Everybody cares.

A: And the company is doing real well.

R: Yes, everybody cared that they learned the big lesson of how to do it, the workers on both sides.

A: That's great. That's just what I wanted to know. We were talking earlier before we actually began the interview, when we were talking before about a lot of the people in this country who were born here or raised here that don't have an appreciation of how good they've got it. Do you think that you have a unique perspective because you've spent a good part of your youth in another country?

R: What everyone should do is go see the other country. Then maybe they'll learn how good they've got it in this country. This is the best country in the world. I kiss that flag everyday, the American flag. For some people, they burn up the flag. In Italy, we respect the flag. The good flag was a symbol of the country. I live here now, and I am an American. I'll kiss that flag until I die. They've got to have respect. Without respect, you've got nothing. Respect is all gone.

A: Why do you think that is?

R: I think the TV made a lot of people lose their respect. Too much money made them lose their respect.

A: There's too much of a difference between the haves and the have knots.

R: Yes. I mean, before when I came over with my family from Italy, my family was all together. Everybody used to get together. They would sing, they'd eat, they'd drink and have a good time. Years went by, and the family isn't together anymore. I bet you can't find a family today that sticks together now in 1993, that get along together. I bet you its such a low percentage at Christmas of families that get together now. And that's stupid, because sometimes now you've got brothers that are jealous of one another. You've got a brother that's got a better job than his sister or the sister has got a better job than the brother, and they get jealous. Then, they don't talk to each other. They don't see each other for years and years. For what? Wasted years for what? They should get along, because those years you can't get back. It's gone, because we're only going to go around once in this world. So everyday is a beautiful day for everybody if they know how to do it. They should respect and get along.

A: Fantastic. That's a refreshing perspective.

R: Let me go back 20 years ago, you know, the way it was 20 years ago. The first years, you know the job I got. [I always said,] "Good morning. How are you doing?" Some people never answered me for years. Sometimes, some of the people, after three days, would turn around and say, "Larry, that's two days you said, `Good morning.' Why do you keep saying that?" I said, "You've got a problem someplace?" [He said,] "How do you know?" I said, "If you had answered me before, not three days later, there has to be something wrong someplace. Common sense will tell me that there's something wrong. One guy ended up not talking to me for five years!

A: Five years?

R: For five years everyday I've seen him. He would go down the aisle this way and be real discreet. [I would say,] "Good morning. How are you doing?" He never answered me, until one day he got sick and went into the hospital. Guess who went to see him. I walked into the room in the hospital. I did. When he saw me, he cried like a little baby. I said, "You want to cry, I'm going home." "No. No, come back," [he said.] He called me back. I went back, and he said, "I'll teach you one of the biggest lessons of your life." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, I'm going to teach you. Do you know how many people came to see me today? Just you. Not even my family came to see me." I said, "What's the matter?" "I did the same thing to my family that I did to you," he said. I said, "Why haven't you talked to me for five years?" Oh, he gave me a couple people's names and what I had told these people about him. I said, "Why didn't you come to me the same day and ask, "Did you say this, this, and this? And I would have told you the truth whether I did or not!" No matter who talks about you, don't stop talking. He wasn't talking to his father and mother. [There was] nobody in the family that he was talking to. He said, "You know, after I get out of here, the lesson you are teaching me . . ." I'm going straight to my parents and family, and I'm going to talk to them. Because of you, I didn't even know I was doing that.

A: You've got a human touch.

R: When he came back to work--he started before me. He started at 7:00. I started at 8:00. I went in the house and saw a dozen doughnuts and a coffee. I couldn't figure out who's they were. I found out he bought them [for me]. Oh, did I ;get mad. I got the doughnuts. I got the coffee. I went and dumped them beside his machine and said, "I didn't come in to see you in the hospital because I want doughnuts and coffee. I won't eat them." Then I turned around and walked away. So now it was 9:30 and everybody took credit. I went up to him. His name was Charlie. I said, "Come on. I'll buy you coffee." He was looking at me. He didn't know what to say. I mean, he didn't bring me a dozen doughnuts and a coffee. Number one, I didn't know why he brought me the coffee. Number two, I didn't even know why he brought me a dozen doughnuts. For what? I don't mind. He was one of my best friends after that.

A: That's great.

R: In fact, most of the people, when you say good morning to one, and they don't raise their hands or eyes, you say, "The hell with them."

A: Yes, that's a good way to look at it. We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

R: That's it. That's all I remember.

A: Thank you.

R: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW