

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ethnic Groups of Youngstown

Personal Experience

O.H. 1189

ANTIONETTA MARY JULIAN SAPIO

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: ANTOINETTA SAPIO

INTERVIEWER: Molly McNamara

SUBJECT: Ethnic Groups in Youngstown

DATE: July 25, 1988

M: This is an interview with Antoinette Sapio for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Ethnic Groups in Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, at 185 Marion Avenue, Struthers, Ohio, on July 25, 1988, at 11:00 a.m.

Mrs. Sapio can you give me a little bit about your background about your family, your parents, and your brothers and sisters?

S: Well, we were eight children, five girls and three boys. My dad worked in the steel mills.

M: Where were they originally from? Where were your parents from?

S: From Italy.

M: Do you know where?

S: Calabria. My parents were from there. They came to America in 1888. At first they settled in New Castle, where my aunt was, then they moved back to Brier Hill. My brother was born in New Castle in 1902, and then he came to Brier Hill. My dad moved with my aunt for

awhile, then they bought a lot and they built a home on Dearborn Street, that is Brier Hill.

M: What did they do while they were living in New Castle? What kind of job did they have?

S: Well, he worked in the mill. Some kind of mill, I don't know. He worked in the mill too, but when he came to Brier Hill, he worked in Sheet & Tube. I think that he was. . .He didn't have a good job and he was. . .

M: But he worked in the mill?

S: Yes, he worked in the mill.

M: Do you know why your parents came to this country?

S: Well, they came because there was no work there in Italy. They came from a good family. So, they decided to come to America.

M: Okay. Can you tell me about your childhood? What year were you born?

S: November 6, 1907. My childhood was okay, you know. We didn't have too much because my dad didn't make too much in the mill, so he worked a lot.

M: Describe a typical day? I know that you have told me some about how you raised chickens and rabbits.

S: Oh yes, my mother used to raise chickens and rabbits. We used to bake bread. We had an outdoor oven and the bread smelled all over the Dearborn Street. It was so delicious. That is about it you know. We had a good time. We didn't have too much, but we had a good time. We had plenty to eat and everything.

M: What was it like going to school in Brier Hill?

S: Well, it was. . .You know, we used to have real bad weather at first. Like in September sometime, even October for Halloween we used to have a lot of snow. We used to have to climb a hill to go to school, and everybody used to slide down it. The banks, and they would slide down and go up and down you know; but we had fun.

M: Can you describe what it was like going to school in Brier Hill?

S: Well, the school was built in 1914. When I went to school in 1914, it was built. So when we went to school we didn't know. . .My mother and dad didn't speak English. We talked Italian. My brother used to say,

"Why don't you listen to the teachers so you can learn, you are in America." My brother used to be the only one. We would be talking Italian all of our lives, because my parents didn't speak any English. But it was fun. I liked school, and it was a brand new school. We made a lot of friends.

M: What was the name of the school?

S: Todd School in Brier Hill.

M: Okay. What about some of your neighbors that lived in that area, do you remember any of them? Where they Italian?

S: Yes, they were all mostly Italian. They were relatives-cousins. They were nice you know. We got along with everybody and helped each other a lot. At baking and canning time they would come over and help my mother can everything.

M: As far as the church that you belong to, what church was that in Brier Hill?

S: St. Anthony's in Brier Hill.

M: This was a Catholic Church?

S: A Catholic Church on West Federal Street.

M: Now is that still there today?

S: No, it burned so they had to change it.

M: Now, I remember you saying that some of the records from the church were burned?

S: Yes.

M: Your birth records?

S: My birth records were burned, and my sisters too, you know. Then we had to go to St. Rocco's Church until they built this other one.

M: Now do you have a copy of your birth certificate or I mean is that lost?

S: No, I don't have it. I have it now. I had to get it when I got my social security, you know, I had to have something. So when I went to Italy in 1967 I had to have a record when I was baptized and everything. Yes, I have it now.

M: Okay, can you describe some of the practices in the

church as far as like Christmas and Easter? Some of the Ethnic?

S: Well, they decorate the church just like they do now, and you go to church, and that is about it you know.

M: Well, could you describe like on Christmas Eve do you practice any ethnic customs?

S: No. We just sang what they. . .They had a book or anything you know. We would go to church for midnight mass and the next day. . .Or Christmas Eve rather we would have all kinds of fish eaten because you weren't allowed to eat meat. Then the same evening we would go to church. The next morning we would get and you know. . .My mother had turkey, or chicken, and we used to make handmade macaroni, spaghetti and that is about it.

M: Why, did you eat fish on Christmas Eve?

S: It is a tradition. We were allowed to eat fish because it was Lent time. Easter and Christmas are the same thing. On. . .I am getting a little bit ahead of myself now.

M: That's alright.

S: See on Christmas Eve it is Lent all day long. It is a Lent day, you are not supposed to eat any meat.

M: Okay.

S: Christmas Eve, that is what I meant to say. Did I say that?

M: Yes. That's alright, that's alright. Okay, what kind of fish did you eat?

S: Well, we ate. . .Well okay, we start out with the sardines and we fry them a little bit in olive oil and then we put a little bit of water in it and dissolve it. Then when we cook the spaghetti we put it over the spaghetti. The name of it. . .Squid. We fry a little bit in olive oil and then we put the tomato sauce on it and let it boil for awhile, simmer it because it is in tomato sauce. And after that we put a little bit. . .We simmer it a little bit and then we put over it spaghetti the same way we would put regular spaghetti with meatballs. Now with the. . .

M: Eel.

S: Eel, we used to bake it in the oven, put lemon juice on it, and a little bit of oregano, black pepper, and that

is real tender. And we would eat it after.

M: Did these customs come from Italy?

S: Yes, from Italy.

M: So your parents practiced this in Italy?

S: Our parents used it when they lived there.

M: Okay, so do you feel that these customs were tied to church? I mean did a lot of Italians practice this?

S: Oh yes, the church, through the church. You weren't allowed to eat any meat, that is why they let you eat all of that fish.

M: Okay, what year were you married?

S: 1925.

M: And what was your. . .

S: June 4, 1925.

M: What was your husband's name?

S: Ralph Sapio.

M: Where was he from?

S: He was born in Avellino.

M: And that is in Italy right?

S: Italy yes.

M: Okay, so when did you come to Struthers?

S: In 1935 we moved to Struthers.

M: What was it like in Struthers in 1935?

S: Well, it was nice because all of the mills were working. The kids went to Sexton Street School and I enjoyed it here.

M: Well, what did your husband do in the mills?

S: He was the hooker. He was the. . .They used to have sheets of steel and they made refrigerators, cars, and stoves, anything. He used to ship them to any place where they wanted, in Chicago, New York, any place. He had to bundle them on a big truck and he had to put the plastic and paper and then he put that rope around them.

so that they wouldn't scale. In case they would scale they had to take them all out of the truck again, and reload them again. Those steel they would leave them there and they would redo them again because they couldn't use them if they were lumpy and bumpy, you know, scratched or anything.

M: What steel mill was this?

S: Oh, Youngstown Sheet & Tube.

M: How long did he work for them?

S: Thirty-eight and a half years.

M: That is a long time.

S: Yes, yes sir.

M: Okay, going back to Brier Hill a little bit, I can remember you telling me a little bit about World War I.

S: Yes. Oh, yes.

M: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

S: Yes, World War I my uncles were in the service and everybody then got the flu, and everybody, you know, got sick and most of my neighbors died, the older people.

M: Did your. . .Your father had the flu, he died of the flu?

S: Dad had the flu and we thought that he was going to live, so we had a hard time and we were on. . .We couldn't get food like we, you know, things were scarce in them days. The schools were closed because the flu came around and if you wanted to go to school, you go to school, but there was no teachers there.

M: What year was this?

S: 1918.

M: Were the steel mills built then?

S: Oh yes, the mills were opened yes, but there was hardly. . .They didn't work most of the men were in the service. But there were a lot of trains coming up and from our house you would see the surges passing by and sometimes we would go down and on West Federal Street and watch them. They would wave you know and we got a big kick out of that.

M: Okay, how many children do you have?

S: Five children.

M: Five children, and they all grew up in Struthers?

S: Well, Mary and Sam and Nick were born in Brier Hill, but the other two were born in Struthers.

M: Okay, did you ever work outside of your home?

S: No, I never worked.

M: How about your mother, did she ever work?

S: No, she never worked. She worked at home canning and things like that and she went right to work.

M: Do you still pass a lot of the customs down as far as speaking the ethnic language? Do your children speak Italian?

S: Yes. They understand most of them, especially Mary understands a lot, but they understand.

M: What about the customs like cooking the fish on Christmas Eve and. . .They do the same thing?

S: They do the same thing that I do.

M: Do you belong to any ethnic organizations besides the church?

S: No.

M: What about your husband, did he?

S: No, he never did either.

M: Have you ever been back to Italy?

S: Yes, I was back in 1967 to see my parents shore and I enjoyed going to see them. Celebrations and that is about it you know.

M: What about your husband's hometown? What was your impression? What did you think of Italy?

S: Well, it was nice. The buildings are like in New York real high, you know, and it was nice. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the churches more though. We went to St. Salvador's Church. They had a big holiday in July and August and we enjoyed that.

M: Now did you get the impression that the houses and



everything were the same as they are here in Italy?

S: Yes, before I went but they are made of concrete. They aren't made like. . .They have to because they have earthquakes once in awhile and they try to protect it.

M: Do you think that you would ever go there to live or did you ever think of it?

S: No, no. My sister-in-law wanted me to stay there and I said, "No, not with my family here in America."

M: Do you think that there is any major difference from living like say in the 1920's, or the 1930's in Youngstown? What are some of the changes that you have seen over the years in this area?

S: There are a lot of changes you know, I don't know. It is different than when I was younger maybe I didn't think about things like I do now you know.

M: How is it different? How is Brier Hill for instance different than it is today? Or Struthers where you live now?

S: Well, one thing is we have more here you know what I mean when we were first here, my dad. . .When we were young we didn't have gas, electric and water. We didn't have that. Then when I was nine or ten years old, then they started to put in electric and water.

M: So you didn't have any electricity at all when you were young then?

S: No, we had cold stoves, two cold stoves, one down in the cellar and one upstairs and that is how we used to heat our house.

M: I bet that was terrible when it was in the winter?

S: It was awful cold, the more that you heated it up especially. We had our. . .In the wintertime it was colder than it is now because our windows used to be frozen until you warmed. We used to have an earlier winter too. Sometimes before even October we used to have cold weather.

M: How about the neighborhoods though, I mean, do you think that it was a different make up of people than it is today? You said that there were a lot of Italians living in Brier Hill?

S: A lot of Italians.

M: Are there still a lot of Italians living there?

S: Yes, some of my cousins still live there, our neighbors too live there.

M: Do you feel though today that the neighbors are the same as they were back then? I have had a few people tell me that the neighborhoods, the ethnic neighborhoods, have changed over the years, say like the from the 1940's to the 1980's?

S: It did change a little bit, you know, after all it is your cousin you know. We came to Struthers and we didn't know anybody, it was strange but then after I got acquainted after awhile. . .I can't complain much about Struthers some nice places to raise children.

M: Is there anything else that you can tell me or anything that I haven't touched on that you would like to mention?

S: I don't think so.

M: Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW