YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Project

East Side

O. H. 716

JOSPEH AMENDOLARA

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

June 8, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH AMENDOLARA

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: early childhood, schooling, grocery stores, immigrants, mafia

DATE: June 8, 1975

C: This is Jeffery Collier from the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. I'm talking this evening with Mr. Joe Amendolara at his home on Academy Drive. The date today is June 8, 1975, and the time is approximately 10:00 p.m.

Mr. Amendolara, could you give me your background as far as where you were born, where you went to school, where you grew up, and up to the time until you went into the service?

A: I lived on Albert Street, on the east side, most of my life. I went to East High School.

C: When did you graduate from East High School?

A: 1935. I then went to Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. I got out of there in 1939 and joined the service in 1942.

C: How long were you in the service?

A: I was in from 1942 to October of 1945.

C: Could you bring us up to date from when you got out of the service, 1945, until now?

A: I went back to the east side; I was married at the time. I had one child on the way.

C: When you came back to the east side in 1945, after you were out of the war, what did you do? Did you start working at the Riptide or did you do something else?

A: No, I had the Riptide before I went into the service. So when I came back from the service, I went back to the Riptide. This was the business that I owned before I went in; and then when I came back I just picked up where I left off.

C: When you were born in 1917, how long had your family lived in Youngstown?

A: My parents probably came to Youngstown in the early 1900's, 1905 or 1906.

C: Did they come over from Italy?

A: My mother came over from Italy when she was nine months old and they moved to New York; my mother was raised in New York City. My dad came from the old country when he was in his twenties. He met my mom in New York and they were married and moved to Youngstown. At that time, of course, there were a lot of Italians who moved to Youngstown and settled.

C: Were some of his friends moving to Youngstown? Is that why they moved here?

A: They knew people who lived here. There were mills; there were jobs. Of course, they moved here because there were jobs.

C: Did your dad work in a mill?

A: My dad worked in a mill.

C: Who did he work for?

A: Republic Steel and probably Sheet & Tube. At that time, I don't know what mills were going, but I know he worked at a couple of them. Then he started a little grocery store. He worked in the mill and at the grocery store part-time until he built the grocery business up enough so that he could retire and go into the grocery business full-time. My dad had nine children and they all grew up in the grocery business; the grocery business was our life.

C: Do you remember all about the grocery store?

A: Yes. We grew up in a grocery store.

C: I bet that was pretty much a center of activity for people. That's probably one reason why you knew a lot of people.

A: In those days, the Italians who came to Youngstown flew into an area where they knew other Italians. The minute that they would move into an area some Italian would take them to the grocery store and introduce them to my father, and my father

would give them a book and they would automatically have credit, before they even got a job. People were introduced to my father as so-and-so who came from our old hometown back in Italy. My father would give him a book and he was automatically on credit until he got a job and knew whether he was going to eat. When he got a job, of course, he would pay back my father for the groceries.

C: So a newcomer could just come in and get whatever he wanted, and your father would just write it down in the book?

A: Yes, he would have a book. Any time that he would come in, they would enter it in his book and my dad's book. This is why, of course, the people all moved into the neighborhood. I imagine every Pole moved into a Polish neighborhood because they knew when they went in somebody would finance them. The Italians did the same; this is why you have all of your little Italian disricts and your Polish districts. I know that any town we used to meet in . . . Old Italians came into the country before they could speak English; the first thing that they would do is come into our store to get credit.

C: Were most of the people who lived right around you on Albert Street Italians?

A: Mostly Italian. Like I said, the Italians were moving in and were replacing the Irish. The relationship between the Irish and the Italians was probably one of friction and fights. The Italians were moving in and the Irish didn't like that.

C: Where would the Irish move to when they moved out of this section?

A: As I grew up, the neighborhood was still half and half; they were still half Irish and half Italian. By the time I was an adult, the Italians and the Irish were now very friendly. In fact, the Irish who remained became friendly with the Italians. There wasn't friction, like when we used to hear these stories of the old days when the Italians and the Irish used to have these big fights. But when we grew up we were all friends at that time.

C: Were there any other groups that were there besides the Italians and the Irish?

A: A small part were Negroes. The Negroes were friendly people, and when they moved in there was never any friction between the Irish-Italian and Negroes. I never remember any trouble between any of them.

C: When you were growing up, did you spend a lot of time in the grocery store?

A: Yes. After school that was our job. We would come home from school . . . The grocery stores today are really just packaged. Back in those days, everything came in bulk; things came in a hundred pound bag. Our job as little kids was to get the potatoes out of the bags and put them in packs. People would come in and want a dozen eggs and in the crates there would be thirty dozen eggs, so if they wanted a dozen eggs, we put a dozen eggs in the bag.

C: Was everything pretty much like that?

A: Yes. Oranges were in boxes. If people wanted oranges, you sold them a dozen oranges. As I said, as kids our job was to put these things up. Everything was in bulk; macaroni was in twenty pound boxes. I can remember bread coming in loaves, round loaves, on racks, unpackaged. The baker used to come in with the bread and put them on the shelves, not even a bag.

C: Then you would proceed to bag them?

A: No, the bread wasn't ever bagged.

C: Never bagged?

A: No. I remember the bread just came in and we stacked it up and people came in and picked up their loaf of bread, threw it over their arm and walked out with it.

C: How much would a loaf of bread sell for?

A: Probably ten cents. I don't remember. I remember at that time ten cents a pound, three pounds for a quarter. Peas and canned goods were between eight and ten cents a can. The wages were forty or fifty cents an hour.

C: When you worked in the store, did your father have anybody beside your family working in the store with him?

A: No. It was a family store.

C: Were there other family stores right around there?

A: One person had a drugstore right across the street. I would say within four blocks there were four or five different stores.

C: Isn't that a pretty good number?

A: No. Each family had nine or ten children. It didn't take too many families to keep the store going.

C: How many families do you think your father had books on or people who serviced your store?

A: Probably about two hundred.

C: That's a lot more than I would ever have thought. Do you think each of the other stores had about an equal amount?

A: Yes. The store across the street, I would say, had about a hundred and fifty; the stores up the street which were small stores, I would say that they were fifty families. They were the type of stores that would stay open later, stay open on Sundays, to try to catch a little bit of that extra business. Today, we have the stores that are operated by the Lebanese. All of your little independent grocery stores today are selling out to Lebanese and the Lebanese are staying open seven days a week, from seven in the morning until ten o'clock.

C: To try to pick up that extra business.

A: This is probably what the little grocers used to do in those days. Our business was from seven o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at night.

C: Would your store stay open every day during those hours too?

A: On Sundays we would stay open in the morning from seven to about noon. People didn't have refrigerators, and the basic idea of being open on Sunday was to allow people to come in and pick up their meats. They were supposed to order meats, and then the meats would be cut and kept in a cooler. Then they would come in on Sunday morning and pick up the meats. Of course, like every other business today, you don't intend to go shopping on Sunday, but you run up to the grocery store that is open and you get what you need and that. This was what happened: You went for what you needed and then picked up a couple of cans of this and then other items that we basically weren't supposed to be selling.

C: Why not?

A: The idea was just to be open to service the meats. We didn't want to sell a lot of other items; it was supposed to be a convenience for the customers for their meats, but whatever they forgot to pick up on Saturday, they would pick up on Sunday. Sometimes Sunday mornings were just as busy as any other morning.

C: Who owned the store right across the street?

A: They were another Italian family.

C: Do you remember the names of the stores down the street?

A: Rossi was the one up on Valley.

C: Were all of those stores the same as yours? Were they just small grocery stores? You said that they would stay open different hours. Did they specialize in anything different than you did?

A: No.

C: They were exactly the same just on a smaller basis?

A: Yes. There were little candy stores in the area, ice cream stores. Back in those days, in every block, there were always a couple of confectioneries and barbershops. The barbershop wasn't like it is today; there was one barber who used to have his own barbershop.

C: Did you have one on your block?

A: Yes. We had one right across the street. In fact, they put one in the same building one time. Part of the building was vacant so he moved into the building and had a little barbershop right next to the grocery store.

C: Did he have just the front of it or something like that or did he have the whole thing?

A: He just had a little front section of it. The storage room in those days consisted of maybe two hundred to three hundred pounds of flour in one hundred pound sacks. We were all delivery boys. No one had carts; wives would come down and shop and they would take home the groceries that they could carry. The rest we would have to deliver. The delivery was done in the wagon in the summertime and on the sled in the wintertime.

C: As soon as you would get home from school, would you deliver them?

A: Yes. Each family at that time would, once a week, take a hundred pounds of flour, twenty pounds of macaroni, and anywhere from five to ten pounds of dried beens; there were no canned beans. They cooked their beans. Today everybody buys canned beans and they are all precooked; but they cooked their own at that time.

C: They are probably a lot better for you like that.

A: Yes.

C: Taste a lot better too.

A: Macaroni came in bulk, in twenty pound boxes.

C: How many deliveries would you have to make when you came home?

A: I would say maybe five, six, seven, or eight each night. Most of the big families would stagger their . . . maybe one woman would come shopping on Monday and maybe another on Tuesday.

C: They pretty much delegated the days that they went; it was more or less a ritual?

A: Yes. We almost knew that Mrs. So-and-so would come in on Monday and Mrs. So-and-so would be in on Tuesday; this was the way that they operated. When I went home I always knew who I would have to deliver to. Each woman had her certain days of shopping. They had one day for washing, ironing, baking, shopping. Like I said, most of it was bulk goods which they shopped for one day a week. If they needed a few odds and ends, they would come down. The odds and ends were usually picked up by the father; they used to like to spend the evening talking to my father. In the evenings, we used to get all of the older folk. Of course, we young kids didn't like it because we knew that the older fellows were going to keep us open for an extra half hour. They would come down and that was their social hour.

C: To shoot the breeze.

A: They would come down, congregating and talking in the grocery store. We used to flick the lights on and off, and my father used to get mad because he was enjoying the conversation.

C: You were trying to shoo them out a little early.

Why weren't there any bars? Was that during prohibition?

A: Yes.

C: Were there places where they would go and have a drink, any places that you can remember?

A: Many places. I would say in every block there was somebody who made and sold wine. All of the Italians made their own wine. I remember my dad didn't make his wine, but my dad had a brother who lived with him and he used to make wine in the fall, grape season. There were hundreds and hundreds of boxes of grapes delivered in the neighborhood; every house had their own little wine press. We had our own wine press down in the cellar. When the grapes were ripe, you could smell grapes all over the neighborhood. Everybody made their own wine, whiskey. There was bootlegging but it wasn't too much in town. I knew several bootleggers operating when we were kids. In fact, we used to go into the areas where we knew we could find empty bottles. We could always take them back to the bootlegger and sell them back for two cents apiece, half pints and pints of empty bottles of whiskey. A guy one block down

from us was a bootlegger. Today one of his sons is a lawyer, another a dentist, and a third is a federal government worker. But at that time a bootlegger wasn't really a disrespectful man; it was just an accommodation. The neighborhood bootlegger wasn't like the mafia or the Chicago racketeer that you see in the movies. The man had whiskey because people wanted whiskey.

C: You said that the Italians drank a lot of wine. Did the Irish drink the whiskey?

A: The Irish were more of the whiskey drinkers. They would drink wine. The Irish would always kid about the Dagos; the Dagos were the wine drinkers. Of course, they could drink the wine, but they were more partial to the whiskey than the Italians were. You never went into an Italian home where they didn't have maybe two, three, or four barrels of wine in their cellar and that was fifty gallons.

I remember in the summer, in our backyard, most of the older people used to come there and maybe each one would bring something, maybe pizza or a bottle of wine. The older people would sit around and talk and the kids would play in the backyard until it got dark and everyone went into the house. These things are the things that I can remember, more of the families getting together, congregating. The husbands would sit around drinking, having a glass of wine and talking. The wives were more or less like little dogs, just sitting there. The kids were in the backyard playing and then as soon as it got dark, everyone would go home, things you don't see today.

C: People were a lot closer.

A: Yes. Today when everyone comes home, you turn on the television. People don't know each other; you can live next door to someone for twenty years and not know him.

C: Did anybody ever say anything when you had four or five barrels of wine, like the government?

A: No, you were allowed. You were allowed to make wine; everybody was allowed to make wine. You could make your own beer. They sold malt beer. In the grocery store, we used to sell malt and hops.

C: To make beer with?

A: Everybody made beer. I remember as a kid making beer, helping my mom and dad make beer. My mom and dad used to make beer and bottle it back in those days. Of course, the beer was always very strong, had a yeast taste to it.

C: Maybe that is why you don't like beer today.

A: Maybe. I remember the beer was horrible.

C: You used to drink it?

A: I tasted it; I never liked it. I didn't care to drink beer. We used to make root beer too.

C: How was the root beer, pretty good?

A: The root beer, as far as I can remember, was very good.

C: Were you also allowed to make whiskey if you were just going to consume it yourself?

A: You may have been allowed to make a certain amount of whiskey, I don't know. The only thing that I can remember about whiskey was that it was made by bootleggers at the stills.

C: In terms of the family and people being pretty close at that time, after how long, as you were growing up, do you think that continued?

A: Even after I grew up and got married. Then the neighborhood started to change. But even when we got married and my children were growing up, there was still a lot of kids, my aunt's kids, my cousin's, and my brother's. The situation was very stimulating; the kids always had a group.

C: Your whole family was there, weren't they?

A: Yes. There were six houses and our backyards all ran together.

C: So that gave you all kinds of kids to play with.

A: Oh yes. You didn't have to go too far out of the family to get in a fight. When I grew up, there was my family and my cousins who lived next door to us and the three houses next to us that were occupied had big families. Each family had nine or ten kids.

C: Were the other families similar to yours? In other words, did their families pretty much stay together like that too? Did each have their own little section?

A: If they got married?

C: Yes. How about as you remember growing up?

A: Yes. If one of the members got married, they both usually remained very close. If they got married, I don't remember them moving too far away. Occasionally, one would marry a

girl from out of town, but most of them, even after they got married, were east siders.

C: They stuck pretty much to that area?

A: If they were married, they tried to find a place as close as possible to the east side.

C: When do you remember the people starting to move out, if, in fact, they did? Let's say in 1950 you came back and you lived on the east side, at that time did the people still remain as a family unit there or had they started to move away?

A: When I came back it was 1945 and I would say about ten years later, in 1955, they started moving. It was a gradual thing, maybe one family moving.

C: When a family moved, would other Italian people usually move in where they lived?

A: For awhile and then all of a sudden, there wouldn't be Italians anymore, but maybe another nationality. Before you knew it the houses started to get run-down and were rented. The Italians owned their own homes. When they started moving, somebody maybe bought the house and rented it. The people who rented the houses became a different caliber of a person. They no longer took pride in their home; the houses started to run down and every time the house was re-rented, the caliber of the person who moved in got a little bit shoddier, dirtier, which I imagine was the origin of the slums. One by one, as the people kept moving out and the houses got run-down, the lower classes took less care of the houses.

C: They were brought up a little more differently, I guess. When you lived there there was a lot of pride and . . .

A: They had their own homes. Their home was their castle, really. When a man bought a house, he may work twenty, twenty-five, thirty years to pay for that house, but it was his home and he took care of the house.

C: On the east side, did the father usually pass his house on to his son?

A: Not necessarily. It wasn't like the idea of the oldest son--like in the old country--always inheriting everything. It was more or less a sharing. As we grew up, I can remember it wasn't always the oldest son. People were more interested in trying to get more of their sons to school and educate them. Everybody had the idea that they wanted their sons to grow up and be somebody more than they were. They weren't too interested in the girls getting an education. That generation

thought that girls were going to be housewives and their job was to take care of the house. The sons were the ones who they wanted to go to school.

C: As far as in your family, you said that there were nine children in your family. Were you the oldest?

A: No. My dad had four girls and five boys and I was the third boy, so I was actually the seventh child.

C: Did any of your sisters go to college?

A: No. I was the first to go to college. My brother Tony, who is the youngest of the family, was the second. We were the only two that went to college. As far as the opportunities go, I would say that my sisters may not have had the opportunity, but my older brothers did. But they didn't want to go. Back in those days, I think they were really glad to get out of high school. For them it was a drag and they just tried to get out. The opportunity was there for them, but they just didn't care to go.

C: You related a story to me at one time and I would like you to go over it again. You were telling me about the Italians on the east side putting some pressure on your family to try to get protection or something like that. Could you relate that story?

A: That would be the original mafia, the Black Hand, as it was probably known when we were kids. These were the bad Italians. They were brutalizing their own people. They would go to their own people, Italians, and demand protection on them. You have seen protection racketing in the movies. These were Italians who would go to all of the little Italian businesses and they would demand a certain amount of money for protection. If you didn't give them protection money, they would bust up your place and beat you up. I don't remember this; this is hearsay; I was just a baby. This go-between came to my dad and he told him that he would have to pay a certain amount for protection and my dad refused to pay it. They put a stick of dynamite in front of our grocery store door. My mother heard someone downstairs and was going to wake my dad up but was afraid that my dad would go down and get killed. She heard people down there. They had been threatening us, so she didn't wake my dad up and the explosion of the dynamite blew the front door of the grocery store off. Fortunately, nobody got hurt.

C: Did your dad pay the protection then?

A: No. My mother's brother lived in New York; he was a boxing promoter. Being a boxing promoter, he had a lot of fighters and he ran around with a pretty rough crowd himself. As I understand, he came to Youngstown when he heard what happened.

These people were a bad element and most people knew who they were, so as I understand it, my uncle and a couple of his friends came to town and beat up a few people.

C: Straightened them around.

A: And we were never bothered again. He also came from New York where they also had a protection racket going, so he knew what the story was. He had some pretty rough friends and I guess they came to Youngstown and straightened out the situation. I don't know how badly the people were hurt, but no one ever bothered us again.

C: Do you ever remember anybody talking about having to pay for protection as you grew up?

A: No. Like I said, the only thing I know of was the Black Hand. I know that my dad was approached by this group. We all knew the story of the bombing; that happened when I was about two years old. All I know is what I hear. I imagine this was the birth of the mafia.

C: It was to my understanding that each group had their own group like that who tried to make a profit off of protecting the people. Do you remember any other people in the area, like the Irish, ever having anything like that?

A: I didn't know because as I grew up in our neighborhood there were mostly Italians. The only Irish who I knew were the older Irish people still living there. They lived and respected the Italians who were their neighbors, but maybe that's why they didn't like the Italians as a race. They knew that there were bad Italians victimizing the other Italians.

C: That happens with anybody, though.

A: Most of the rackets start out victimizing their own kind. The coloreds do the same. It's easier for them to victimize the coloreds than victimize the Italians, because the coloreds know just who they can scare and who they get protection money from. This was what the Italians did.

C: Did you go to grade school at East High School at that time? Was it all one, big school?

A: No. When I was a kid, it was just a little two-grade building, the first and the second grade. The McGuffey Reader was the very famous reader in this area and all over. There was a little school at that time called the McGuffey School. We went to the McGuffey School for the first few years and then we went to Madison on McGuffey Road, but at that time it was Madison Avenue. When I grew up, there was not East High School. Kids used to mostly go to Rayen or to Central High. Central

High was where the engineering school is now for the Youngstown College. That was Central High School. Kids either went to Central High or they went to Rayen and South; those were the only two high schools. I imagine East High was built maybe ten years before I got there.

C: Was it a pretty nice school when you went there?

A: Oh yes.

C: Was it very big?

A: It hasn't changed. It's about the same size as it was then. In fact, I think it is probably smaller now.

C: You said that there were a lot of cowboy movies at the theaters? You used to go there every weekend?

A: Sunday. Sunday was movie day. When we were growing up it wasn't . . . Sunday was a big day for movies. The Regent Theater or the Lincoln was where all of the kids went to see the cowboy movies. In the movies, they used to have people walking down the aisles selling ice cream cones.

C: Like a ball game?

A: Yes.

C: You said that you would take a streetcar downtown. What was downtown like?

A: Downtown was the hub of the whole city. Downtown was everything.

C: What was down there? Can you remember any stores?

A: The big stores were McKelvey's, Strouss, Stambaugh Thompsons', and Sears.

C: This would be in the 1920's?

A: 1920's, 1930's. In the Youngstown area there were maybe a dozen movie houses. All of the movie houses were downtown. You had a few little neighborhood theaters, like the Lincoln Theater, but all of the big movie houses were downtown. There was the Paramount; the Dome was next to it; right across the street was the State Theater; there was the Palace, Warner, Strand. These were all located in the downtown area.

C: There was enough business that they would all stay in business?

A: Yes. When you went downtown on Sunday, even after the war, Sunday night was movie night. I can remember after the war,

on Sundays, when everybody was downtown. There were the bars. After the movie, all of the little bars and everybody went down to the sing-a-long.

C: Did you go downtown pretty frequently? Did you go down every weekend?

A: Every Sunday.

C: Why didn't you go on Saturday? Did you work?

A: Yes. There were people who went shopping downtown. There were shoppers that went downtown regularly all during the week. Downtown at that time was . . . All of the stores closed at 5:30; there were no evening hours. The only thing that was opened in the evening were the restaurants and the theater. After 5:30, if you went downtown, it was strictly theaters. There were a lot of people downtown for the theaters.

C: If you went downtown on Sunday were the stores still open then?

A: No.

C: Just the theater.

A: It was just the theaters.

C: Were the restaurants open on Sunday too?

A: The only restaurant that I even remember was the hot dog place which served hot dogs or hamburgers.

C: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW