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Porco sei; Porti are: the autobiography of a Italian American family in Des Moines

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Porco sei; Porti are:
The autobiography of a Italian American family in Des Moines

by

Jacqueline M. Comito

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: Anthropology

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

University
Ames, Iowa

1995

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DEDICATION

This paper is lovingly dedicated to my mother, and her brothers and sisters, who so graciously spent long hours telling me of their childhoods and giving me the precious gift of a Calabrian Iowan heritage. It is also dedicated to the spirit of my maternal grandparents, Giovanni and Lena, who died before my birth. Through these pages, I have been able to live a small part of their lives, and to mourn their deaths. I can not measure the degree to which these people have molded my existence. Above all else, this work is dedicated to all of the third and subsequent generations of the Porti family. It is important that we know from where we have come in order to know where we are going.
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PORTI FAMILY TREE

PORCO = BENINCASA
Michele (1850s-?)
Teresa (1850s-?)

Giuseppina (1877-195?)
Francesco (1880-195?)
Rosaria (1885-1935)

PORTI GIOVANNI (JOHN)
b. Belsito, Calabria (1888)
d. Des Moines, IA (1960)

CRISTINA ELVIRA (LENA)
m. 1919
b. Belsito, Calabria (1902)
d. Des Moines, IA (1953)

Laura (1904-1985)
Joe (1909-1978)
Emily (1909-1978)
Albert (1908-1983)
John (1911-1961)

MICHAEL (b. 1920)
FRANCIS (b. 1921)
MARY TERESE (b. 1923)
JOHN (b. 1926)
JOE (b. 1928)

JOAN (b. 1933) m. COMITO Bill 1953
CRISTINE (b. 1945)

Emily (1909-1978)

ROTALE = DECICCO
F.Antonio (1866-1930)
Marianna (1876-1932)

Emma (1897-1974)

CRISTINA ELVIRA (LENA)
m. 1919
b. Belsito, Calabria (1902)
d. Des Moines, IA (1953)

Laura (1904-1985)
Joe (1909-1978)
Emily (1909-1978)
Albert (1908-1983)
John (1911-1961)

MICHAEL (b. 1920)
FRANCIS (b. 1921)
MARY TERESE (b. 1923)
JOHN (b. 1926)
JOE (b. 1928)

JOAN (b. 1933) m. COMITO Bill 1953
CRISTINE (b. 1945)
From the early 1880s through the 1930s, several thousand Italian immigrants, mainly from the southern provinces of Italy, traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, to find a more prosperous way of life. In Des Moines, the immigrants and their offspring were successful in a variety of economic ventures and earned respect as city officials and business people (McCoy, Silag 1982:60). In fact, the Southside of Des Moines today is still known as “Little Italy” because of the many residents and store owners of Italian descent.

Despite a strong ethnic pride and an ever increasing number of descendants, very little has been written about the Italians in Des Moines. McCoy and Silag (1982) suggest that the Italians were able to adapt rapidly to life in Des Moines, while at the same time maintaining a strong sense of their cultural heritage and preserving some of its values and traditions. Although most of the first generation Italian Americans have died, they leave behind them a manifold of second, third and fourth generation Italian Americans. With every generation, the process of acculturation has changed or eliminated many of the traditions and values that those early immigrants held as important to their identity, while a few traits are purposely maintained.

This study explores what it means to be a second generation Italian American in Des Moines during the first half of this century by looking at the life history of one family being raised during this time. The story of one family helps illuminate how the Italians in Des Moines, although they share many cultural norms with other Italian Americans in the United States, have their own unique history based on their place of origin in Italy and their new homeland, Iowa.
Significance of Study

The United States Census Bureau "classifies the first and second generation Italian American as foreign stock...it should be noted that the census bureau classifies a third generation member as native American stock" (Venturelli 1982:26). Apparently, in the minds of the U.S. government, the first two generations are "not quite American," i.e. foreign stock despite citizenship. What the U.S. Census Bureau recognizes is that the second generation -- individuals born in the United States whose parents, one or both, were born in Italy -- are caught between the two cultures; they are never clearly full-fledged Italians or Americans. Because of this ascribed pivotal position in the Americanization process of their ethnic group and my own standing as a third generation Italian American, I chose to collect the life history of one specific second generation Italian American family in Des Moines. The stories of these seven siblings' childhoods are representative of a specific time and place in history and shed light on what it was like to be raised by Italian immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century.

In this opening chapter, I will place the study of the Porti family in Des Moines within a broader historical perspective of general ethnicity research in the United States, giving some consideration to both the social and political implications of a few of the major trends in social science research of the last few decades. Along with this, I will look at some of the major Italian American regional studies and show how the Des Moines study adds another dimension to the overall picture of Italian ethnics in the United States. Within these first few pages, I will also clearly outline the methodology used to complete this study.

Chapters three through ten are dedicated to the story of the Porti family. Instead of a linear approach, I am using a thematic approach in which their stories will be heard in birth order around specific key issues which make up the fabric of their lives. Family relationships are explored in chapters three and four. The locality of the family in the city

1Pseudonyms are used for first and last name of the family.
and their means of subsistence are the focus of chapters five and six. Chapter seven explores the siblings upbringing at home, church and school. The importance of food and key life cycle events in relationship to their "italianness" is discussed in chapters eight and nine. Chapter ten gives a detailed look at the premature death of their mother of Lou Gehrig's disease and the family's method of coping with the situation. Chapter two is written in the form of a "prologue" and combines my literature and theater background with my newly gained education in anthropology. It is the retelling of a story I heard in Belsito, Italy, of my grandfather's name change and immigration to America. The concluding chapter will identify what it means to be a Calabrian Iowan living in Des Moines during the first half of the century and how this study might encourage and aid in the process of ethnogenesis in the personal lives of many third and fourth generation ethnics in America.

Placing the monologues in order of the siblings' birth will allow the reader to gain a sense of change through time. Mainly, the text will be autobiographical with a short narrative at the beginning of each chapter to introduce the different thematic concerns. Footnotes are used for all other editorial points of clarity, so as not to disrupt the flow of the stories. The very nature of this type of presentation is somewhat lengthy and repetitive as each family member tells his or her piece of the story. The strength and value of this work rests is in the gradual revelations of the differing perspectives to shared experiences enabling us to see the influence of ethnicity on the individual's behavior.

**Life Histories in Method**

Although a wide range of methodologies, combining the data gathering techniques from history, sociology and anthropology, were used to complete this study, it is above all else, an anthropological approach to life history research. Data were gathered for this study by both qualitative and quantitative means. Along with several life and oral history interviews, a twelve-page survey was mailed to approximately 100 Italian American families living in Des Moines. Time was also spent researching personal documents and
photographs; public documents, i.e., wedding certificates, land grants and newspapers. This broader-ranged research serves as the framework in which the life histories of the Porti family are analyzed. In studying the immediate members of the individual family, the history and culture of the society in which these people were raised becomes clearer.

I compiled the life histories of the Porti family through a series of lengthy audio recorded individual interviews of all seven siblings. This specific family was chosen for several reasons: five out of the seven married ethnic Italian people; six out of the seven still live in the midwest; the one sibling who married outside his ethnic group is the only sibling to leave the midwest and break family connections; twenty-four years separate the oldest from the youngest sibling, and finally, I have long, established ties with the family -- their trust and confidence are necessary for the success of life history work.

Along with being a third generation member of this family, I have spent a considerable amount of time with certain members of the Porti family over the last five years. During the hours spent cooking with my aunts or gardening with my uncle, they have passed on to me many cultural traditions that their parents had given to them. Through natural curiosity, I began to ask them questions concerning their childhoods in the hopes that I could gain a greater understanding of my heritage. Without realizing it at the time, these hours spent with my family have become the building blocks for this study.

The life history methodology was the best approach to meet the following goals of this study: 1) to explore the dynamics of an Italian American family during the first half of the twentieth century in Des Moines, Iowa, by using life histories and other personal documents to gain insight toward societal processes based on individual perceptions; 2) to compare the perceptions of each individual sibling, especially those past events which are common to all of them, paying close attention to the family dynamics that are revealed; 3) to find differences in the perceptions of the siblings when considering the following: age, gender and birth order, in reference to specific events common to them all; 4) to identify selected factors that the individual family has in common with the Italian
American community in Des Moines in terms of perceived ethnicity.

The Porti family interviews were conducted over a four month period during the spring of 1994. One key component to the success of life history interviews with older citizens is that a series of sessions occur over a period of time in order to help engage their memories. The beginning of each session would often be a review of the certain issues raised at the last meeting. The mood of the interviews were generally open, flexible and amicable.

The population from which this study is drawn consists of 748 families and individuals, many of whom subscribe to the Italian American Cultural Center Newsletter. Three groups were identified for the study as follows: 1) seven siblings of the Porti family, three of which still live in Des Moines; 2) a sampling group based on second generation Italian Americans in Des Moines over the age of 50 who were selected randomly from the Italian American Cultural Center’s mailing list of 748 Italian Americans with an equal number of males and females, and only one survey was sent per household; 3) from the mail survey sampling group, twenty people were asked to give more in-depth oral histories and were selected on the basis of their responses to the questionnaire, specifically how their early experiences in Des Moines reflects the diversity of the Italian Americans.

In order to collect the quantitative data a closed-form questionnaire was developed based on the literature review and the specific needs of this study. The survey included sections dealing with demographic data and ethnicity perception. The surveys were sent during January of 1994 and over the period of two months 62 out of the 100 surveys sent

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2My Uncle Frank was not at all agreeable to the interviews when I first approached him for reasons I can only, and perhaps inaccurately, guess. After the first session, he began to enjoy himself and looked forward to our weekly meetings. Aunt Mary, on the other hand, was happy to participate in the study. She enjoyed the time spent with me but did not really enjoy being interviewed and wanted it to be finished as quickly as possible.
were returned. The qualitative data was collected from a questionnaire based on the quantitative survey results and the literature review. The questions were specifically open-ended and flexible to allow the informants freedom to explore different avenues of information not anticipated by the researcher. Three moderately different questionnaires were composed to reflect the uniqueness of the three different groups to be interview. Before each interview, a statement of the voluntary nature of participation and the commitment of the researcher to maintain complete confidentiality was read to the informant. Both oral history interviews and life history interviews were conducted in Des Moines in the homes of the interviewee. Twenty-four interviews were completed in Des Moines, one in Lincoln, Nebraska, one in Portland, Oregon, and one in Carroll, Iowa. The informants were guided in their remembrances through a series of questions focused on parental and sibling relationships, marriage patterns, ethnicity, schooling, neighborhood, friends, occupation/professions, foodways, traditions and perception of ethnicity.

Finally, I lived in Belsito, Italy, the birth village of Giovanni and Lena Porti, as a participant observer. The first visit was in the summer of 1989; the most recent took place from May to Aug of 1994. While I was there, I lived in the household of Giovanni’s niece Teresa and her family. I learned their ways and language, gaining a unique understanding of shared cultural traits between the first cousins despite the fact that they were raised continents apart. Although most of this research is not included in this paper, my trip to the mountains of Calabria adds a flavor to this work that can not be quantified.

Ethnicity and Social Science Research

The roles of ethnicity, acculturation, assimilation and cultural pluralism on the
subjective processes undergirding American society are still, at best, highly controversial and debated issues among social scientists. As heated as the debate is today, the argument did not really begin to take shape in the United States until the 1960s and 70s. Sociologist Andrew Greeley hypothesizes that the reason ethnic diversity has not been studied seriously in the United States may be the result of dogmatic a priori assumptions, perhaps mixed with the unconscious guilt many social scientists may feel for having left behind their own ethnic groups (1974:3).

Although difficult to prove, Greeley’s explanation as to why the “melting pot” or assimilation theory of American ethnicity was accepted, if not almost taken for granted until the last few decades, perhaps hits closer to the truth than many of us would like to admit.

The melting pot theory, in which assimilation is seen as the long term outcome of different groups in the United States, can be divided into two different stages of development: 1) the idea of Anglo conformity in which the old stock Americans were determined that the immigrants of the great wave, 1860 to 1924, adopt white Protestant values; 2) the “new American” theory in which a new culture would arise from the blending of minority groups, which could be termed acculturation in a broad sense of the idea (Higham 1955; Glazer and Moynihan 1971; Greeley 1974; Olson 1979; Alba 1990). Through the press, cartoons and fiction, the melting pot theory became a part of popular culture. Even today, the term can be heard to describe American society.

Perhaps the appeal of the melting pot theory can best be understood in the context of the American nativism movement. John Higham’s critically acclaimed work Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925 (1955) is an excellent overview of this movement. As a historian, Higham analyzes a wave of discrimination in the United States that began with the end of the Civil War and resulted in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 which greatly limited the number of Asians, eastern and southern Europeans who could enter the U.S. Higham’s widely accepted work examines the
emergence of a predominant American ideology centered around the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Through the eyes of fear and hatred toward foreign radicals, Asians and Catholics, the desired result of the melting pot was not the emergence of a “new person” (the sum of two equal parts), but the product of pressure cooking these immigrants into the Anglo-Saxon image. Higham points out that nativism, or the intense opposition to a minority based on their “foreign” or un-Americaness, merged its ugly head only after the first theory of the assimilation lost its validity. The best way for the millions of immigrants to gain a piece of the American economic dream and be considered “American” was to shed their culture of origin and assimilate to the Anglo-

During the 1930s and 1940s, American and British anthropologists were busy looking at the “acculturation process” among Native American groups and within Meso and South America. This was based on the general interest in how traditional cultures changed as a result of contact with twentieth century Western “civilization”. European cultures were viewed as constant, in order to trace the change within the native populations. In 1935, Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and M.J. Herskovits, published their “Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation” in which they suggested the direction acculturation studies should venture:

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures comes into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changed in the original culture patterns of either or both groups (Redfield et al., 1936:149).

They were very broad in their outline of how this definition could be applied to situations in which contact occurred and the analysis of the process of change, whereby traits were both selected, integrated or determined. They called for the study of the psychological result of acculturation in which the final result of the change was met through acceptance, adaption or reaction (1936:150-52).

During the following twenty years a multitude of acculturation studies were
published. Most of these studies were concerned with the contact between modern and traditional cultures, in which "traditional" seemed to be defined as "anything that was not Western civilization." They were not concerned with the variation among the European immigrants to the United States, or how these differences affected the process of acculturation. Nor were they particularly interested in how the young American culture changed (if at all) under the impact of immigration. Higham's work in 1955 was the first serious treatment of many of these issues in U.S. culture.

It was not until the 1960s and 70s, that anthropology, sociology and history decisively let go of assimilation as a viable explanation for the development of American culture and began to search more deeply for how acculturation worked. Instead of looking at immigration in terms of a general shared experience (Ingham 1951), individual immigrant groups were studied (Olson 1979). What emerged from this research was a newer idea of acculturation in the United States, which is often referred to as cultural pluralism or the indistinct survival of ethnic subcultures (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Barth 1969; Lyman and Douglas 1973; Greeley 1974; DeVos, George 1975; Olson 1979; McCready 1983; Rotheram and Phinney 1987; Alba 1990; Buenker and Ratner 1992).

Today most social scientists would agree that group and individual ethnicity in the United States is formed through a process of acculturation and assimilation, with groups making conscious or unconscious choices to maintain some ethnic traits while disregarding others. Slowly, the idea of American society as a mosaic is replacing the melting pot on the lips of everyday people.

In the *Rise of the Unmeltahle Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies*, Michael Novak (1972) argues that the "PIGS" (poles, italians, greeks and slavs) have cultures so at odds with America's dominant culture that conformity is an unreasonable demand. The lack of assimilation (or "WASPification") is not regrettable to Novak.

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4The uniqueness of the idea of ethnogenesis is that although it can and does effect the "group", it is also a very personal process that can be undertaken by the individual. Acculturation in the traditional sense was viewed in how it effected large scale change.
because he feels that mainstream American culture has a gross lack of emotional construction and that adaption to this is unthinkable. Novak, a third generation Slovak American, views the ethnic resurgence as a vital and creative force in American life. He makes no attempt to hide his biases as he compares the strength of the ethnic Catholic family to the individualism and nativism of the WASPS. He paints the Anglo-Americans as enemies to other white ethnics. Novak's book was highly controversial, but was a freeing experience for many second and third generation ethnics. In other words, Novak is telling the white "meltables" that it was acceptable and desirable to be "unmeltable" ethnics.

"Ethnogenesis" is the most recent theory on how cultures change after continuous and direct contact with different cultures. It assumes that acculturation is not linear but can be and is circular. Although social scientists give voice to the non-linear theory of acculturation, their work often does not reflect this position. It adds a level of complexity to the study of acculturation that suggests that as cultures change, new cultural traits can be introduced, often deliberately. This results in the affirmation of the ethnic groups and a promotion of their new identities even as the old erodes (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross, 1975; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Roosens 1989). Ethnogenesis suggests that ethnicity is not something static but is in a constant state of flux. The idea is that ethnicity is something that can be created both consciously and unconsciously. This ties directly to an earlier idea by Hansen, written in the 1930s, which predicted a trend by third generation ethnic Americans to turn their eyes back to the culture of their grandparents. What is being recognized in ethnogenesis is that the culture embraced by the later generations is creatively composed of specifically chosen traits from the "old" culture as well as new

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5In my own situation, I made an effort to learn many of the family traditions of my grandparents, took several trips to Calabria, Italy, and now speak the Italian language and a bit of Calabrese. In essence, it could be said that I have made a conscious choice to be more Italian and I think my mother would say that I am overtly more Italian than she is. Although, when one reads her story, it should be noted that she, too, is the only member of her family who made the effort to learn to speak Italian outside of the home.
traits relevant to either the individual or the group.

What social scientist cannot seem to agree upon is what exactly are ethnic traits and ethnicity in general. Fishman (1989:12) discusses how the idea of ethnicity in Western society can be traced to ancient Greece and the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle on whether ethnicity is fixed and god-given or endlessly mutable. The challenge of ethnicity, as Aristotle sees it, was rooted in familial love and is biologically based. This naturally expands to extended family and others who are more distantly related forming strong links and bonds. Taking the side that ethnicity is cultural, Plato urges for non-ethnics, describing them as more beneficial to the state. Individuals are less corruptible; a more evenhanded management of the polity could be obtained. Non-ethnics can devout themselves to the public weal. Having neither property or family, it could focus on the general need without bias and conflicts of interests. Aristotle argued back that those who do not love and initially feel uniquely bounded to specific others, cannot then love mankind and benefit the state -- a child who belongs equally to one and all, belongs to no one. It is obvious from this debate, that ethnic identity has been linked to a political and social agenda since early in Western thought.

Through the years, the degree and nature of the discourse has developed and change. In Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (1969), Barth defines an ethnic group as a distinguishable biologically and self-perpetuating unit which shares fundamental cultural values. These values or traits are communicated through interaction and membership within the group is identified both emically and etically. Barth recognizes culture as way to describe human behavior. Ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the individuals themselves and serve as a means of organization between people. Even though there is a constant flow of personal across ethnic groups, boundaries still persist. Although Barth was looking mainly at the nomadic groups of Afghanistan and West Pakistan, his theory of acculturation and boundary maintenance could be applied in a general way to research concerning ethnic enclaves in U. S. cities.

In 1974, Wsevolod Isajiw, did a survey of how social scientists had used an
explicit definition of ethnicity in their research concerning ethnic relations. Out of the 65 anthropological and sociological studies dealing with ethnicity, only thirteen included some definition of ethnicity. According to Isajiw, anthropologists found it easier to define ethnicity when researching tribal societies, but had trouble applying similar solutions to American culture. In Isajiw's final analysis, the top five attributes of an ethnic group are as follows: common ancestral origin, same culture, religion, race or physical characteristics and language (Isajiw 1974).

To a historian, ethnicity only exits in relationship to migration. Immigrants create ethnicity as a means of preserving some of the way of life they had left behind through such things as the symbolic association of foods, language and religion. In the case of the United States, "ethnicity was as much a reconstruction of old world visions of order and security as it was an accommodation to American society" (Olson 1979:xx). Up until this time, ethnics were defined by how they differed from the mainstream culture. In other words, ethnic traits were those that separate a group from the main stream through things like language, religion, economics, education and residence. Under these guidelines, ethnics and economic/political interest groups become synonymous (Alba 1990; Greeley 1974; Glazer and Moynihan 1963).

A survey of research done since 1974 reveals that other social scientists are still unable to come to a consensus concerning a specific definition of ethnicity. In the interest of clarity (and perhaps avoiding chaos), the following are a few of the definitions of ethnicity since Isajiw's study:

Ethnicity is more than ancestry, race, religion or national origin...it patterns our thinking, feelings and behavior... (Rotheram 1986:11)

Ethnicity is a sense of belonging determined by what a person feels about her/himself not by observable behavior--comes from individual need for collective continuity--personal survival with group survival (Devos 1975:17)

Ethnic group emergence is seen as a functional adaptation to
complexity in social, political and economic conditions, especially as they occur in the post-industrial revolution era (Burly et al., 1992:5).

If we equate ethnicity with heritage, then everyone is an ethnic. Almost all of us have families that started out in other countries, perhaps a long time ago, but nevertheless somewhere else. The United States is not like older countries, which have long national histories and long periods of cultural development. Rather it is a stopping-off place to which people came from somewhere else. This is an essential element of our self-identification as a nation and is increasingly an important element of the way we define ethnicity (McCready 1983:xviii).

Ethnicity and the importance of our heritage are not external social issues that we can discuss dispassionately; rather they touch and involve each and every one of us individually. These are deep, personal, almost primordial social factors and as such need to be taken very seriously. Heritage is not something that deals exclusively with our past; rather it is an integral part of who we are right now (McCready 1983:xx-xxi).

Vulnerable is perhaps the best word to describe an individual who is acquiring or losing an identity (Royce 1982: 188). Today, ethnic identity is not a shameful thing; in fact, its absence is...ethnic pride is not limited to the group itself; it is the heritage of each and every member...it is the savor and remembrance of the past...more important, it is the promise of the future (Royce 1982:232).

...ethnic identity must not be reduced to a matter of psychology, that is, translated purely into terms of self-concept and inner orientation, or left at the level of how one presents oneself to others...such mundane actions as eating ethnic foods, enacting holiday rituals, peppering English speech with mother-tongue words and phrases, and participating in ethnic social clubs give meaning to an otherwise abstract assertion of ethnic identity and breathe life into ethnicity as a social form. If ethnic identity has no
content, no commitments in terms of action, then it represents a pure form of what Herbert Gans has called "symbolic ethnicity," a self-conscious attempt to "feel ethnic" in the exclusion of "being ethnic" (Alba 1990:75).

Where these definitions stray from Isajiw's summary of earlier ones is in the psychological and almost spiritual component that makes ethnicity still a key factor to American identity. One thing becomes clearer, an ethnic group is no longer being defined through its inferior position to the mainstream culture. In other words, it is not only the struggling working class who have ethnicity, but ethnic group identification can occur across economic levels. Under this definition, mainstream American Anglo culture begins to be viewed as just another ethnic group (Alba 1990). Ethnicity is all of the above, and without doubt not a neutral subject, but one that goes as deeply as religion. This might explain why people fight, laugh and die over it (Eriksen 1993; Tambiah 1989; Greeley 1977). To reduce it to one or more of these definitions, ignores its complexities as well as the multiply facets involved in acculturation and ethnogenesis.

The emergence of a new "white European" ethnic group in American culture, as predicted by Glazer and Moynihan (1970) and supported by Alba (1990), can and should be seen as an expansion of the nativism movement described in Higham’s work. European Americans’ ethnogenesis is part of both a political and economic agenda in the United States of the 1990s⁶. This new ethnic group, upon deeper analysis, has the trappings of the earlier Anglo-Saxon American culture. If European Americans can be

⁶Evidence of this trend can be found in the political rhetoric of the Reagan years and the current Republican momentum spreading across this nation and in the pontification of many popular media personalities of the 1980s and 90s. Their main argument is that “whites” are now at economic disadvantage in this country because of affirmative action and other civil rights legislation. They feel that whites are quickly becoming minorities on college campuses across the country with very few scholarships and aid available to them. An argument that can easily be dissected if one analyzes the demographics of the power structure in this nation and looks at college enrollments and financial aid distribution. If whites are disadvantage, they hold a surprising amount of power both economically and politically in this country. I image that many African Americans wish they could be so disadvantaged.
melted together to form an ethnic group, then they can be considered a minority and should be privileged all rights and opportunities afforded other minority groups in our culture. A closer analysis of the political rhetoric of the 1990s favors the unification of “whites” into a cohesive interest group whose “rights” are somehow threatened by the interest of the other major ethnic blocks.

Most of the major studies on the emergence of this new European American have looked specifically at East Coast cities. The results are then generalized to represent acculturation in the United States (Greeley 1974; Glazer, Moynihan 1970; Alba 1990). It is questionable whether the non-Anglo white ethnics in America would want to abandon their heritages in order to merged as a new white ethnic group, despite the political and economic advantages. Before this new idea of ethnogenesis replaces the idea of multiculturalism in the popular culture, it is imperative that general studies like Alda’s are conducted in the other regions in the United States to see how the different ethnic groups shape the fabric of the regional cultures.

In light of the difficulties in pinpointing ethnicity to a specific set of values, it is important to analyze individual ethnic groups and their regional differences throughout the United States. In the past three decades, many good studies have been published specifically on the Italian Americans. From San Francisco to Florida, their histories and cultures have been analyzed and explored. The focus group of this study are the Italian Americans in Des Moines, Iowa, specifically a second generation Italian American family.

**American Italians or Italian Americans? Some Regional Studies**

It was not until my siblings and I left Iowa as adults did we learn what a strange thing it is to be an Italian American from Iowa. The first response most of us received when we claimed to be Italian was, “What? There are Italians in Iowa?” Occasionally, I will have a conversation with a brother or sister that begins with, “Gosh, we aren’t really Italian compared to my friend from New York...or this guy at work from Chicago.” The average Italian American is often asked to measure their “Italianness” against the popular
media images such as *The Godfather* movies or Pizza Hut commercials, when the truth of the matter is that there is a great deal of variation among the different Italian American groups in the United States. Anthropologist and folklorist Carla Bianco (1974) establishes in her study of Rosetta, Pennsylvania, and Rosetta, Italy, that the rich variety of Italian culture at large and the variation within American Italian ethnics can be contributed to multiformity of cultural patterns from the deep divisions in Italian society. An Italianism or identity with Italy on the whole was a very American concept, according to Bianco, with the only real shared trait that Italians maintained upon emigration from Italy was a fear and distrust of authorities, government and all those outside one’s own family or village group.

For several decades Handlin’s *The Uprooted* (1951) portrayal of immigration as assimilation, a profoundly disruptive experience in which peasants were uprooted losing all meaningful ties with their past cultures and Old World family ways, was the accepted view. In the early sixties historian Rudolph Vecoli (1964), based on his observation of Old World cultural continuum in the Italian enclave in Chicago, rejected Handlin’s views and called for a more intense study of individual Old World cultures and their expression in the different regions in the United States. Scholars of Italian Americans quickly took a pioneering lead in the area of ethnicity research. For an excellent histography of all the major Italian American regional studies in the United States see Pozzetta’s 1989 article. With the addition of the major research conducted by anthropologist, sociologist and psychologists, the following discussion follows Pozzetta’s summary of the work compiled by historians.

One idea that seems to be shared by the different regions in the United States is that for American Italians, community was not a place but a spiritual, emotional or blood tie. Taking Vecoli’s lead, Yans-Mclaughlin’s (1971) study of the Italians in Buffalo, N.Y., was groundbreaking in its illustration that what is really at work in the process of immigration was a more equal idea of acculturation in which there was a more dialectic relationship at work, a dynamic process of give and take between the new environment
and old cultural ways. What emerges in this study that traces one particular family over a thirty year time period, is an immigrant who has an influence on their destinies. The family is the staple organization that relies on traditional relationships while individual were adapting to new social conditions. According to this study, Italian Americans do not assimilate to American society and remain working-class because of their familialism and male dominated households. To many social scientists at this time, ethnicity is equated with working-class and Americanization is represented by an upward economic mobilization. Yans-McLaughlin concludes that one dimensional statistical descriptions fail to elucidate the quality of the lives and that empirical measurements fill out one half of the historical dialect but the miss the half culture provides.

The studies that followed Yans-McLaughlin's were as diverse as the communities studied (Alba 1985; Bernardi 1990; Bianco 1974; Candeloro 1992; DeMarco 1981; Gillette, Jr., and Kraut 1986; Johnson 1985; Magliocco 1993; Mangione and Morreale 1992; Martinelli and Gordon 1988; Mormino 1986; Mormino and Pozzetta 1987; Nelli 1983; Leonardo 1984; Orsi 1990; Rolle 1980; Romanucci-Ross 1975; Tricarico 1984). The typical description of Italian Americans as patriarchal, strongly familial, and working class is both challenged and supported by the research conducted in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Mormino (1986) shows, through a 100 year history of “The Hill” in St. Louis, how ethnic culture changed in a series of contexts: property ownership, sports, politics, bootlegging and religion; and partially underpinned the communities survival in the 1980s. The idea that ethnicity is related to working class and that Italian Americans have achieved high economic status through some abandonment of cultural norms, overcoming many obstacles to get there is the main theme of Nelli’s (1983) work. Nelli takes the position that ethnicity is directly related to working class and that most Italian American communities today consist of older immigrants and newer immigrants with only a sprinkling of youth. The children of these immigrants leave behind their cultural traits as they climb the ladder to prosperity and move into suburbia. One of the few non-industrial studies of Italian Americans comes from Gillette and Kraut’s (1986) study of Washington
D.C.'s Italian American community. This study reveals that ethnic cohesiveness was maintained through occupational choices, religion and voluntary associations and shared customs rather than chain migration and large neighborhoods.

Des Moines, like Washington, D.C., is more of a non-industrial area. Although many of the Italians got to the capital city of Iowa by working the railroad, many abandoned this work soon after for more entrepreneurial pursuits. On the average, the fathers of the second generation had at least two separate occupations in their lifetime, and many of them four or five. A significant number of the wives worked beside their husbands in a family business like a grocery store, restaurants or a stand at the City Market. This pattern of frequent occupation switching is consistent to the Calabrese culture in which 75% of the Des Moines population originated (Arlacchi 1983).

DeMarco's (1981) work with the Italians in Boston's North End supports the idea that the immigrants loyalty rests first with their families and secondly to their villages and that "Italian" was a label given by non-Italians. The father is depicted as controlling the outside family needs; the mother manages the internal affairs of the family. In this group, the Italian family is not judged by the occupation of the father, but by the well-being of the household in which the mother plays a very important role. Rolle (1980:113) describes the Italian American family as "mother-centered and father-dominated" and that the patriarchal nature of the family is somewhat of a myth. The surface layer of familial relationships in many Italian families suggests a male-dominated institution. A closer probing of the inner workings of the family reveals a more complicated set of dynamics and the label of patriarchal is perhaps both inaccurate and misleading. It becomes more important when analyzing family dynamics, to take a more regional and less general approach to understanding it. As Bianco (1974) suggested, there is a multi-dimensionality to Italian culture based on both region and village, and it was these individual cultures that were transferred to America.

During the 1980s, some excellent research was completed by social scientists concerning the family within the different regions of Italy. The Des Moines population
reveals that male and female relationships are more consistent with those found in turn-of-the-century Calabria with the idea of “rispetto” (Arlacchi 1983), than Buffalo, New York (Yans-McLaughlin 1971). Children’s importance is strongly linked to their ability to benefit the family finances, survival and honor. Many of the interviewees in Des Moines worked for the family on some level or another, often making sacrifices for the benefit of the whole. It is interesting to note that in the case of the Porti family in Des Moines, the family is not only mother-centered internally but she controls the outside family needs as well. When compared to other Italian American women in Des Moines, it becomes apparent that this role is somewhat unusual more in degree than nature.

That Italian American ethnicity can not be generalized across state and regional boundaries is apparently clear in Mormino and Pozzetta’s (1987) study in Florida and Di Leonardo’s (1984) study of California Italian Americans. In the Italian American neighborhood in Ybor City, Florida, Mormino and Pozzetta (1987) describes how Old World values survived for long periods of time but also mixed with the local culture. Acculturation was not only toward mainstream American ways but also a blending of the traditions of their Cuban and Spanish neighbors. They emphasize that acculturation is not a linear process but can go as easily backwards as forward. Material success put a premium on change but attachment to tradition made them resist it. Ethnicity and social class are still closely interwoven.

On the other hand, anthropologist Leonardo’s (1984) study dispels the myth that class equals culture and that those Italian Americans who are no longer working class have assimilated into white culture. She contests the idea of Italian American community suggesting that community was more of an idea than a reality, Italian Americans first and foremost unified within family, and then village boundaries. By placing the Italian American population in its historical, social, economic and political context, she shows that class and ethnicity flourished within the suburbs in California. Through an analysis of popular culture, she reveals how the media’s presentation of Italian America stereotypes were both accepted and embraced by the ethnics as well as rejected. Finally, she
demonstrates that ethnicity is cognitive; we articulate that which we want in our lives. The Des Moines population also stretches the myth of community within the enclaves. The city of Des Moines is divided into two Italian neighborhoods. Locality was usually dictated by family or village ties. It can be questioned whether the Italians living in the large Southside Italian colony were “more Italian” than those living anywhere else in Des Moines. No matter where an Italian lived in Des Moines, they were able to have gardens, a symbolically Calabrian feature and effective economic strategy for survival. The Porti family did not live in either Italian neighborhood and yet, most of their important social ties were with other Italian immigrants and their offspring. This study demonstrates that although ethnicity is what we make a point of articulating, it is also something like culture that works on a subconscious level which eludes self-identification.

It was noted by folklorist Sabina Magliocco (1993:107) that food is such an “immediate part of daily life that its communicative powers are often taken for granted.” Individual identities of Italian Americans have been maintained and communicated to non-Italians mainly through their foodways. It is central to many key life cycle events of the typical Italian American: baptisms, weddings, funerals, holidays and family reunions. The Italians in Des Moines are no exception. Many of their strongest memories and ethnic identifications are associated with the production, preparation and consumption of food. As one of the Porti siblings suggests, food is one of the main things that make them Italian. One of the major areas of variety found in the Des Moines population is in food preparation. Again, many in Des Moines prepare the more simplistic cuisine of a Calabrian peasant, which is not to be confused with the commercial media-created American Italian foods.

Magliocco’s (1993) study of an Italian American festival in Clinton, Indiana, 

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7The dynamics of the different neighborhoods in Des Moines is discussed in greater detail in Appendix One.
shows the difference among food prepared at the private level in an Italian American's home, display foods, typically associated as Italian, commercially produced foods for public sale, and "rechristened" American foods (like soda pop and ham sandwiches) that are given Italian descriptions. As seen here, food is symbolic of emotional subsistence and nutrition, as well as a powerful reminder of the past, and should not be underscored as an important cultural trait.

This Des Moines study adds an important piece to the picture of life in America for Italian ethnics. The compilation of the life history of one specific family makes it easier to peel away at the many layers of ethnicity for a more direct access to deeper levels of social relations in Des Moines and allows for a nice comparison with the other regional studies in hopes of understanding why variation and similarities occur (Bertaux 1981).

Life Histories in Theory

Life histories are a very distinct, valuable but somewhat enigmatic type of personal document used by social scientist (Linde 1993; Rosenwald, Ochberg 1992; Myerhoff 1992; Kaminsky 1992; Watson, Watson-Franke 1985; Bertaux 1981; Gagnon 1981; Langness, Frank 1981; Kohli 1981; Dollard 1949). A life history is any "retrospective account by the individual of his life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person" (Watson, Watson-Franke 1985:2). Rather than a collection of all the events of an individual’s life course, they are rather a

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8 For another perspective on Italian Americans in Iowa, see Dorothy Schwieder’s (1983) Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa’s Coal Mining Communities, 1895-1925. One chapter features in particular several interviews with Italian immigrants. One of the major differences in terms of culture between the coal miners and the Des Moines Italians, is that many of the Italians who came to work in Iowa’s coalmines originated from Northern Italy. They found the transition from an urban to a rural coal town existence somewhat difficult. In Des Moines, the vast majority of the Italians were from Southern Italy, specifically Calabria. The transition from rural to city was aided by their ability to create an almost rural enclave in Des Moines, by maintaining some connection with land use and food production.
"structured self-image" (Kohli 1981:65). A good life history is one which describes a society, through an in-depth look at an individual's life experience and aids in understanding it rather than explaining it (Bertaux 1981). Although anthropologists have been collecting life histories for as long as they have been doing field research, much debate has surrounded the methodology, analysis, use and recording of the gathered material (Linde 1993; Myerhold 1992; Watson, Watson-Franke 1985, Langness, Frank 1981, Bertaux 1981, Erikson 1975, Aberle 1951; Dollard 1949, Kluckhohn 1945).

Several significant life histories have been published and used for scholastic, educational and entertainment purposes. Mainly, they have been used as a good introduction to the culture studied. However, one can argue that an individual life history, whether grossly deviant or not, can serve, not as a typical member of the society, but rather as a means of observing how one person reacts to the common experiences faced by most people of that society revealing the relationship of motivation and institutions (Aberle 1951:4).

The most recent scholars of this type of methodology are using the term “life stories” to describe their work (Linde 1993; Rosenwald, Ochberg 1992). Although the methodology seems to be the same, these researchers draw semantic distinctions between life histories and life stories. Life histories are described as a part of the anthropological paradigm concerned with naturalism and realism; life stories focus more on the postmodern paradigm of cultural scripts and narrative devices used by individuals to interpret the events in their lives. According to Linde (1993:21), a life history is a life story if it has the following: 1) an evaluation that is focused on understanding the individual and not the world in which they live, and 2) retellable stories over time. Mainly, these approaches are different ways of interpreting the life history, elevating it to a new status in social science research.

Anthropologist Oscar Lewis was one of the more influential proponents of life history use. In 1961, Lewis was one of the first anthropologists to compile a life history of a family in *The Children of Sanchez*, "which raised the life-history approach to a
distinct and literary genre” (Langness, Frank 1981:24). What distinguishes Lewis’ work from any prior work is his emphasis on the whole family approach and his presentation of the material in autobiographical context. In his introduction to the book, Lewis explains the benefits of allowing each individual to tell his story in his own words:

The independent versions of the same incidents given by the various family members provide a built-in check upon the reliability and validity of much of the data and thereby partially offset the subjectivity inherent in a single autobiography. (1961:xi)

Lewis felt that whole-family studies allow one to break down the polarity of culture versus the individual allowing us to see “both culture and personality as they are interrelated in real life” (Lewis 1965:xx). By using each member of a family, you avoid some of the biases of the individual:

This technique permits us to see the family through the eyes of each of its members and gives us insight into individual psychology and family dynamics. The independent versions of similar incidents in family life serve to check the validity and reliability of the data. (Lewis 1965:xxi)

Presenting the life histories in an autobiographical style allows the reader to “hear” the personalities of the speakers and make note of the variations in perspectives. A summary of the interviews on the part of the researcher erases the uniqueness of the family life history approach. *La Vida* (1965) and *The Children of Sanchez* (1961) are excellent examples of Lewis’ pioneering work.

Watson and Watson-Franke agree with Lewis on the scholarly value of family life histories:

...start with the life history as a basis for constructing theories about the role of individual behavior in culture change and culture transmission. If we look carefully at the life history as a subjective document, we can see the individual’s self-perceived impact on his social environment. By corroborating his statements with other versions, as in the family autobiography approach, we get some feeling for the
dimensions, scope, and intensity of individual influence radiating outward to the family and from the family to the neighborhood and even to the larger society. (1985:204)

They further argue that an analysis of the individuals might actually change the understanding of the process of the whole society:

...if we look at the way individuals in their life histories actually maintain the construct of social existence as phenomenal realities, we may indeed learn that the subjective process undergirding society may be qualitatively different from the “typical” process (1985:206).

Alba (1990:164) sees the family as a good place to start in the examination of ethnicity:

The taproot of ethnic identity nestles in families. Ethnic identity is, first and foremost, a matter of ancestry, of self-definition that is both handed down within the family and created on the basis of family history.

Perhaps a greater understanding of the role of ethnicity in our American society can come from hearing the story of one family during a specific period of time in United States history.

To understand the Americanization process in the United States, in general, it is important to understand the processes that guide and dictate acculturation patterns in individual ethnic groups and to explore the mechanisms of ethnogenesis in individuals. The recording and experimentation with different approaches to individual or family life histories of second generation Italian Americans in an area like Des Moines is a key to
understanding the forces that contribute to human culture change and development.

Ethnic identity can be a means of locating oneself and one’s family against the panorama of American history, against the backdrop of what is means to be American. There should not be a contradiction between being American and asserting an ethnicity (Alba 1990:319).

The following life history of the Porti family has, above all else, three specific purposes: 1) to understand who I am as an American, 2) to define who I am as an Italian, and 3) to describe my people as Calabrian Iowans. Hopefully, this study and others like it will be stages in removing the contradictions that still exist in “being American” and “asserting an ethnicity”.
"PROLOGUE"

I first traveled to Belsito, Italy, in 1987. I returned for two different stays during the summer of 1989 and 1994. My maternal grandparents were born in Belsito. Time and time again, as my identity became known to the different members of this small mountain village of a thousand inhabitants, I was told the following story of my grandfather who had left his place of birth almost 80 years earlier. No matter who told the story, the details remained somewhat consistent. My grandfather would have been amazed that his name was on the lips of his paesani long after he left them. The following is my retelling of this story. I tried to fill in some of the historical details through careful research of the social and ecological atmosphere of Calabria during the first decade of the twentieth century.9

At the top of the hill, the road divided into three distinct directions. One way led deeper into the heart of the Calabrian mountains where the next village was no better than the previous one with very few jobs and barely enough food. The second path was the one currently trodden. Giovanni turned and followed it with his eyes, back to the village of his birth.

From Giovanni’s lofty perch, Belsito seemed both blessed and cursed by God. The sun lovingly shined on the vineyards and orchards ready for the fall harvest. Where the

9Much of the descriptive material comes from a series of articles written by Antonio Mangano. The articles were published in Charities and the Commons in 1907 with an article a month from January to May under the title “The Effect of Emigration Upon Italy”. Mangano was an Italian American journalist who spent several months traveling around southern Italy exploring the reasons for emigration and the impact of it on the lives of the contadini who stayed.
slope was very steep, the people of the village built platforms of earth, twelve or fifteen feet wide, to hold the grapes and olives. The mountain was banded from base to summit by thick stone walls, six to eight feet tall, to keep the soil from sliding. In the heart of the area, was the cluster of stone and concrete huts which surrounded the piazza and the church. Under the blue sky, the silvery gray-green foliage of the olives sparkled like diamonds. To Giovanni’s empty stomach and crushed spirit, the town’s beauty and enchantment was solely a surface image.

The huts were filled with families who sleep like sardines on the dirt floors. The church was filled with the distance of God and managed by a priest whose full belly and bulging pockets was in contrast to the suffering of his congregation. The piazza was filled with whiskey-drinking, card-playing old peasants. The orchards and vineyards which produce the sweetest wine and finest oils in the world sparsely feed the ever increasing inhabitants of Calabria. It was not possible to rejoice in natural beauties when your dignity was being denied by poverty and a set status in life.

A few months earlier, Giovanni had stood in this same spot. His mission on that occasion had been a visit to Cosensa. He had been determined then as he was today. He remembered how the same worn shoes he wore today had inadequately prevented the stones and pebbles from tearing at the soles of his feet. Despite the pain and the blood, Giovanni had continued to walk the last mile to Cosensa.

That day, like today, nothing could have stopped him from his mission. His mind was set. Soon he would talk to the judge. Afterwards, he’d no longer be forced to bear the sad burden of his birth.

The road he walked wasn’t a road at all but a groove that had been marked out by the torrents which rush down the mountain side in the rainy season. Even if he owned a wagon or a cart, it would be impossible to use on such a path. The “la strada provincial,” the one government provincial road in the region, does not pass by Belsito. It is the lack of proper roads and vehicles that keep the Southern Italian in his place. Most of their time was spent trying to get from one place to the next and back again. Or else they
stayed in place.

When Giovanni left his village for the trip to Cosensa, they had lined on the street to jeer at him.

"Ho, Gio, where do you go at such an early hour with such determination?"

"Perhaps he has a girl friend in one of the neighboring villages. Why else would he be wearing his best clothes? Why I think he even bathed using what precious water his mamma has?"

"No, I heard it was to Cosensa he travels."

"Cosensa?"

"Si, he goes to see the judge."

"And what would our fine Signore Giudice want with our young contadino, a mere boy? Wasn’t it yesterday he was hanging onto his mother’s tit?"

"No, listen. Giovanni, goes to petition the judge to change his name. A capisco?"

The crowd burst out great laughter.

"Ho, Gio, buon viaggio. When you return, you’ll have pigs to tend."

Refusing to acknowledge the taunts, Giovanni kept his eyes on the road ahead and his feet moving. With only a mile to go, Giovanni quickened his pace with enthusiasm. He took his mandolin from his back and played a tune to support his momentum. The little instrument sang the boy’s ambition.

I will show the people of my village, he thought, I will return a different man. Soon they will be cheering my name. They will see a man can rise above the nature of his birth. After today, the men of my village will come to me for advice and encouragement. They will be lining up with their daughters in the hope I will favor one above the rest. Nothing will be too good for me. The priest, fat Luigi, will seek my council and I will tell him to seek less from his people and give more. That is how it should be.

Giovanni’s daydreams and music carry him that last mile in speed and happiness. Cosensa was more immense than Giovanni imagined. Never before had he seen so
many large buildings, fruit stands, wagons, carts and people. But then, never before had he ventured farther than a few miles away from Belsito. His eyes widened at the various vendors. Anything you could want or need can be purchased here, he thought. Giovanni obtained the location of the courthouse from one of the vendors and found himself at the foot of the largest building he had ever seen.

"Madonna," he cried, "the Municipio di Cosensa is greater than the church in Belsito. How much larger the church of Cosensa must be."

Not knowing whether he should cross himself, Giovanni hesitantly entered the official building. For luck, he signed the cross quickly and genuflected before moving any further. He questioned the first person he found on the whereabouts of the judge. The laughing clerks sent him to the second floor, first double door on his right. The smooth surface of the marble floor tempted Giovanni into removing his shoes. He could stand there all day and allow the cool veneer to ease the soreness of his feet. Before entering the office of the judge, Giovanni brushed the layer of dust from his clothes. The journey was long, he thought, why did I bother to bath.

Inside the room were dozens of other people with hopes of addressing concerns and complaints to the judge. The guard at the door stopped Giovanni before he could move any further.

"Che vo? We allow no beggars in here. Go before I throw you in jail."

"No, signore, you don’t understand. I am here to see the judge. Please, sir, I’ve walked all the way from Belsito. It is very important, please."

"Hey, Paolo, we’ve got a barefoot contadino requesting an audience with El Giudice. What do you say?"

"Va bene. Send him here. The judge could use some fun."

The guard picked Giovanni up by the seat of his pants and delivered him through the crowds to the one called Paolo.

"Okay little man, the judge will see you."

Giovanni cautiously entered the large room. The man behind the desk wasn’t as
frightening as Giovanni pictured. He had a friendly look and a large mustache. The judge beckoned him nearer while Paolo and the others watched with great curiosity and amusement. When he was within three feet of the desk, Giovanni removed his hat and held it between his hands to cover his shoes. He lowered himself to his knees and kept his head bent.

“Giovanetto, sopra...up, I am not the Pope.”

The onlookers held in their laughter. The boy stood but kept his eyes lowered.

“What brings you before me? You come to play me a few tunes and lighten the burden of my day? Huh? Speak up, lad.”

“Nooo, Sig....” Giovanni cleared his voice bringing it down a pitch or two, “Signore, please, I would like you to change my last name.”

“How old are you?”

“Dodici anni, thirteen in October, signore.”

“So young to know your mind.”

“Please, signore, scusa, to me this is important.”

“What is this family name you wish to change?”

“Porco\textsuperscript{10}, signore, my name is Giovanni di Porco.”

The judge laughed deep within his belly and it slowly spilled from his mouth to echo from the walls. The others added their voices to his. Giovanni felt the building shake with their amusement. The judge raised his hands to silence the bystanders. Holding his laughter, he looked at the dirty urchin’s tears.

“No, Giovanni, no....Porco sei nato. Porco sei. Porco rimarrai. Go, go...return to where you came and play your tune to the pigs. Go.”

The laughter orchestrated itself to a forced crescendo. Giovanni left the room unnoticed by most. His dreams were left behind with the jocularity of the courtroom. The first guard stopped his exit and handed him a coin.

\textsuperscript{10}Porco is the Calabrese word for pig.
“There is a stand near the train station that has the best gelato in Calabria. You keep what you don’t spend.”

Giovanni gave him a half smile, “Grazie, signore. You are very nice.”

The guard rubbed the top of Giovanni’s head with affection, “Fare un buco nell’acqua. Che vale11?”

Giovanni took the coin and gave him a whole smile, “Finche c’è vita c’è speranza12. Addio.”

On the steps of the municipio, Giovanni sat and replaced his shoes. He took the small wooden instrument from his back to play away his grief. This mandolin was a treasured inheritance from his grandfather and his nonno before him. For centuries, the item had been in his family. Legend told how his family was once minstrel to emperors and the various Greek and African conquerors of Calabria. These lofty rulers were easily soothed by a well-plucked and sung tune. Usually the invaders were won by the cheerful disposition of the natives who cared more for a song, dance, and time spent together than thoughts of great physical gain. Unlike their counterparts in the North, the southern peasant was happy with a full stomach and a healthy family. Starvation, not foreign or domestic encroachment, has the Calabrian wanting more.

The mandolin was given to Giovanni as the youngest nipote on his grandfather’s deathbed three years ago. His mind’s eye saw the withered hand stroke its last song before handing the instrument to the boy. “To give music, son, is to give life. Si, our ancestors played before kings but it was the songs for their neighbors that brought them the most joy. But regardless of your station in life, a man is only accountable to God.”

Drawing the boy closer, the old man kisses him on both cheeks. He then held Giovanni’s face in the palms of his hands and smiled. He called to Giovanni’s padre. “See, Michele, your son has the strength of our family in his eyes. He is a good boy and will do you

11“You have made a hole in the water. What is the use?”

12“Where there is life, there is hope.”
proud. Play, Giovanni, let me hear the future before I am the past. Play.” With slight hesitation, the boy let his hand caress the strings. Mimicking the earlier movement of the old man, Giovanni picked a folk tune passed through the ages. He added his young voice to his feeble playing and the adults in the room smiled at his natural ability. Material goods can be stripped from them and they can be made to live with swine, but no one can take or change the inheritance of their body, blood and being.

The mandolin was returned to his back unplayed. There was no song to lift Giovanni’s pain. Cosensa was not as wonderful as it was twenty minutes earlier. He started walking toward the train depot to find the gelato stand the guard had mentioned. The deeper he penetrated the city, the clearer his vision. He saw other boys his age with no better clothing or nourishment. He saw beggars on the streets hoping for the generosity of a few gentlemen. The blood crimes in Cosensa were a direct result of the misery and want of the people. Being a pig herder was better than the filth of the city. Better to starve in Belsito with his family than starve in Cosensa with strangers. Thinking of his parents brought some cheer back to his mood. He flipped his newly acquired coin in the air.

At the top of his lungs, he repeated the words he spoke to the guard to anyone and everyone who would listen, “Where there is life, there is hope!”

The people around him began to shout and cheer. Giovanni smiled thinking they applauded his courage. The chants were moving away from Giovanni. He saw hundreds of women and children waving goodbye to their brothers and fathers on a train headed for Naples. The women were crying and the children looked confused. The men blew kisses from their windows and exclaimed in loud voices, “Viva l’America, viva il Paradiso!”

Another small group was gathered around a very wealthy looking gentlemen. He must be a government official or dignitary, Giovanni pondered, no one else in Calabria can afford such nobility. Giovanni knew he should buy his gelato and begin his long journey home. First, he must discover the identity of the stranger. He asked an old man sitting in front of a bar.
"El signore? Why, he is an American. Before he was an American, he was a Calabrian, a contadino\textsuperscript{13} like you or me. Go listen to him, son and hear his tales of il paradiso."

Giovanni joined the American’s followers and became enchanted with his tale of the democratic, individualistic America with its opportunities for every industrious man, no matter how lowly his birth to become a successful, respected citizen. As he listened, Giovanni felt a surge of self-respect and ambition fill his chest. A spirit of hope and independence stirred inside him. He could be better than a starving pack-animal. He had the right to dignity.

Giovanni once again flipped the coin in the air and turned to buy his gelato. The chants of the men leaving on the train echoed in the background. The American continued to spin his tale of prosperity, “The Americans are good people, and any Italian can do well in America if he is faithful to his work and honest.”

All the other sounds around him are muted. The stranger was speaking directly to the young contadino. Giovanni’s shattered dream was replaced with a new one. He carefully placed the coin in his pocket and left his hand there to protect it from theft. Rather than buying gelato and satisfying a temporary hunger, he’d apply it to a greater yearning: passage to America. Filled with great enthusiasm and promise, Giovanni joined his voice to those of his countrymen, “Viva l’America, viva il Paradiso!”

And now, months later, here Giovanni stood with pain, fear and determination. Placing his suitcase in the dirt, the youth took the mandolin from his back and played a soulful goodbye to his village. The vibrating strings floated over Belsito like a cloud of sorrow and love. He stroked the strings slowly and deliberately, knowing his mother, father and family heard his song and wept. Belsito lamented with the soulful tune as she loses more of her lifeblood to the Americas. Finger by finger, the boy stopped his motion, the tune faded to nothing and he closed his eyes forever to the physical panorama

\textsuperscript{13}peasant
of his country. Turning on his heels, he faced his future.

The final path lead to the railroad which lead to Napoli which lead to the sea and America. With the small suitcase in his hand and his mandolin returned to his back, the fourteen year-old youth began to walk once again the thirty mile road to Cosenssa. Only this time, he was uncertain as to when he would return. If he would return. Kicking a stone from his way, Giovanni thought that in America, the roads may not be paved in gold, but certainly they are not packed with dirt and manure. In America, he would be able to do what the Italian judge denied him. He swallowed back his sorrow and chanted as he walked, "I was born son of a pig. In Italy, I may be a son of a pig. But in America, son of a pig no more."
THREE

PARENTS AND PERCEPTIONS

"My mother ran the grocery store;
my dad did whatever my mother wanted."

Life for the average Italian family centered on the home. Most of the literature on southern Italy suggests that it was the fundamental unit of social structure (Arlacchi 1983; Johnson 1985; Mangione and Morreale 1992; Rolle 1980; Yans-McLaughlin 1971). In Des Moines, Italian mothers generally worked very hard around the house. If there was a family business, she divided her time between that and the home. Twenty-two percent of the mothers in Des Moines worked outside of the home and several more performed tasks for income inside the home. This had more to do with their Calabrian background than anything else. They came from a situation where necessity had them working side by side with their husbands on the land. It is estimated that in the Cosentina area of Calabria, at the turn-of-the-century, 34 percent of all permanent peasant workers were women (Arlacchi 1983:26). Home and work were not separated in these women’s lives because the Cosentina countryside was spotted with individual homesteads.

The key principle that ruled a Calabrese marriage was "rispetto". This relationship had little to do with emotions, sexual love was considered a taboo subject, but rather indicates the obligations and reciprocity between husband and wife. "Rispetto" for the

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14 This number could be higher because many Italian mothers worked 20 to 30 hours in the family business but did not consider it to be "work" (Sirey and Valerio 1982:187). This is reflected in the Des Moines population, see Appendix One.

15 Belsito lies within this region.
husband means he keeps faith with his wife, treats her well and preserves her from the need to work for others, nurturing her position in the community and the overall honor of the family. The wife owed “rispetto” in her obedience and fidelity to her mate and her capacity to save and run the house, including control of the family finances and caring for her husband’s health and well-being (Arlacchi 1983:28-29).

Michael
Wasn’t nobody quite like my mother.

One of my earliest memories of my mother is running the store or driving the car. She would go down to the wholesale house in the morning and buy produce for the store. Quite often, in the summer time when I wasn’t in school I would go with her -- almost all the time from third grade on. She was almost completely occupied with making a living.

My mother was short and stocky. I would say just about five feet tall. Black hair. I think dark...brown. Brown eyes. You wouldn’t call her frumpy at all, she was just very plain...very plain. She was very outgoing. Oh, she was an extrovert. She had lots of friends. I’ve never seen such a funeral procession in your life. She was...everyone just loved her...that is all that I can tell you.

When my mother got married, my grandparents built a one room store on the front of their house. And then I suppose rented it to my mother. So that they could actually get started into the business with a minimum of investment. It was my mother’s and father’s business. It was part of her dowry. Oh, that was a fairly common situation for a woman to have a dowry, my father assumed the property after they were married. My grandparents probably just did it because they were financially able. And it didn’t involve

16The family members as represented in this life history are what Barbara Myerhoff would call “ethnopeople”. This is the acknowledgement that both myself and my interviewees have changed during the course of the research and the people presented here are representative of that change (Kaminsky 1992).
a lot of money, you understand. We always lived apart from our grandparents. But my grandparents lived in the same house as the grocery store, but they didn’t have a common entrance. They were wall to wall but they were separate entities. I wouldn’t say most of the grocery stores were done that way, but a lot of them.

Mom didn’t wake up too good in the morning. She was a real sleepy head. She would get up and get us off to school and then go down to the store and see what she needed and then go to the wholesale house. My dad used to go down to the store at six o’clock in morning to cut meat which would take him three or four hours. He would get there at six o’clock in the morning and close, lock the door and leave for home at nine o’clock in the evening. That would be interspersed by a nap in my grandmother’s home, which was next door, every afternoon.

After Mom got through buying her stuff, which would take an hour or two, she would get back to the store at about eleven. Clean up the stuff and then make her stand, which is what they call it. You know display all the stuff like a display counter in a modern supermarket and wait on the customers all day long. Stay in the store while my dad took his nap and then she would go home and it would be five or six o’clock.

She wasn’t there when we got home from school. Nobody was there. Me. I was in charge from, oh, I don’t know...age ten, eleven. Before that time, we used to have people who used to come stay especially in the summer time. She hired...I can remember two or three different people who lived in. Not live in but would come early and stay all day and go home when my mother would take charge. They weren’t paid much.

The earliest memory I have of my father was spanking my butt. I was probably five or six. See we used to have a driveway beside the store that used to go to the backyard. It’d been built by the WPA. All we had to do was pay for the concrete. Mom used to park the station wagon in the driveway and empty the produce from the wholesales. Well, one time, he told me while I was fooling around in the car, “Be sure you don’t touch the gearshift.” He says, “DON’T.” Well, I did. And the car backed across the, back down the driveway, across the street, and hit a concrete tube that the
WPA had built which stopped the car. It would have been a terrible mess, depending on what happened. It was pretty steep, like that. It scared the shit out of my dad. So, I got a whooping. Only one he ever gave. The only one.

My mother gave me lots of whooping. (laughter) Not real bad, but I remember it. She whipped me, oh, just 'cause I was ornery like. I was a tyrant. I've got to admit it. I was the oldest brother, and I was going to see that certain things were done. My mother was the disciplinarian in the house, 'cause my dad wasn't there. Well, he left the store at nine o'clock and pulls up at nine o'clock. By the time he got home, it'd be nine thirty. From the bus. 'Bout bedtime for us, 'cause we had to go to school in the morning. And he'd leave in the morning at six o'clock. We weren't even up. She was the man of the house.

Dad was a short, bald-headed, big-nosed, but not moles like me. Well, everybody liked him. We used to love to see him get drunk. 'Cause he got real playful. And wrestle on the floor with us kids. Oh, he probably got drunk a couple times a month. Just, generally on Sundays, they'd have a good card game. Some days on the card game, he'd end up dry as a bone. And sometimes he might end drinking too much.

Oh, I remember those card games. Two different card games they'd play, to see who would win or lose and pay for the beer. You buy a gallon of beer. See who would pay for that. I think it probably cost fifty, sixty cents. And then they had a different card game. I don't remember how to play it. They would play for a boss and a lieutenant. The boss had absolute control over the beer. Except he had to get the consent of the lieutenant. There was a separate little card game they played. First, they would play the cards to pay for the beer. And then, they'd play cards to see who the boss and lieutenant was. And then they distributed the pitcher of beer. No. I never played. Both strictly men's games. So the boss could give away beer, but they had to get the consent of the lieutenant. And they'd say, "Ok, let's get John Porti a glass of beer." (slam) "No. But we got to give Jimmy a glass of beer." "Well, give Jimmy a glass of beer, but I get a glass, too." Boss, "No." So, finally, sometime the lieutenant gets mad at the boss and
make him drink it all. The whole gallon. It was a matter of pride. You could drink him under the table. And sometimes, you sit there like, you get mad at the way things would be. Sometimes, my dad, when I say a couple of times, he used to play almost every Sunday. When sometimes, he wouldn’t get a drink. Stone sober. It was a matter of honor that he didn’t buy ‘em drinks on the side. They played at different houses. And in the summertime, they used to play behind the store. So I would go along when he went on Sundays. My mother would go and visit. The whole family would go, usually. It was something to do.

Mother, while dad was playing cards, would be socializing. They all were Italian and spoke both Italian and English. Most of them that I knew were from Southern Italy. We were fellow...Calabrians. Well, a lot of times, it depended on who you were socializing with. If they were younger, like my mother’s peer group, they probably talk English. My mother, as a rule, spoke Italian with the older women. Like the other women who were like mother spoke Italian.

My folks, if they didn’t want us kids to understand, they’d revert to Italian. But usually they spoke English. Seemed to be immaterial to them if we spoke Italian. We didn’t speak it. ‘Cause my mother, my parents were in business and spoke pretty good English. Whereas, Lucille’s mother and father both were not associated with the public. And spoke Italian exclusively at home. That’s why Lucille can talk pretty good. Where I didn’t learn any of that.

I don’t have no idea what my father’s life was like before he came here. He was thirty-three when he married Mom. Before that, he worked on the railroad in Pennsylvania. They were day laborers on the railroad. Bringing track and repairing and stuff like that. He didn’t talk about it much. Of course, he was pretty young. He probably didn’t do it very well. He was fair with his hands. He could repair things for
our house. I think he might have returned to Italy once before he came to Des Moines. Somebody said that, whether it was him or somebody else I don’t know.

He worked in the liquor store here in Des Moines for Ruas. One of the Italians that sponsored him, corresponded back and forth, urged him to come to Des Moines. And talked, I suppose, about the masciata. That was an arranged marriage. My mother was coming of age, and he was looking for a wife. They got together. It wasn’t because they came from the same village in Italy. Not necessarily, no. They could have come anywhere from other villages, but could have been part of it. So, that’s the way it was. But later, not with my mother for her children. ‘Course she’s from strong-willed women. But my mother never, never went in for that at all. She might say to me, “That’s a nice girl.” Or something like that. But no attempt to arrange or anything.

My parent’s relationship was very ordinary. They would just wake up, go to work, come home. That’s all. Did I ever see affection between my parents? Yeah. Mostly, on his part. There was too many kids around for affection. There were no display of affection around the kids. Oh, he might put an arm around her and kiss her or something like that. They called each other Giovan and Lena. She called him Giovan, a corruption of Giovanni.

Dad and I got along fine. But, I was my Mother’s pride and joy. I think my father and I probably felt the same way about her. All the other kids, too. As far as I could tell. The only trouble with my mother is she got along in the years when Cristine was born. She was, about that time, she wasn’t feeling well. And that made it hard. I had a very close relationship with my mother. I was my mother’s favorite child right up to her death. I can’t recall my father ever showing any favoritism.

Dad had no responsibilities around the house, just when they got a furnace. Well,

17Whether John Porti returned to Calabria or not before coming to Des Moines, can not be verified. However, it would be consistent with the “bird of passage” syndrome observed in many southern Italians. According to a cousin in Belsito, John’s parents heard nothing from their son until the birth of his first child Michael.
when I was too young, I suppose he cut the grass. When we were older, you know, when we were able, we cut the grass. Mother did everything. Washing, ironing, cooking, everything. My God, she was the only one there for most of the day. I did everything around the house when Mom wasn’t there. Everything.

Now that I recall, I really didn’t know my father very well, because I never saw him. Yeah. When I was out of the house. And then, you know, as you reflect back. Only time he ever played with us kids was when he was drunk. He never was mean, never. Basically, I’d have to give him a B+, he was a pretty good father.

My mother was really competent. She could do anything. She did most everything. She probably went into the marriage with nothing but the store. And make it a go of it, and she did. Her working was unusual for women of her time, seems like that. Well, no, I shouldn’t say that. Aunt Emma, she ran her family. It seemed like a lot of the Italian women were working. Well, I’d say it was fifty-fifty. Probably half of the women stayed home with their children. Half of ‘em worked. My dad didn’t seem to mind women working. I can’t recall any about what he thought.

My dad’s education was, I don’t know for sure. I would imagine to 6th grade. My mother went until the 7th grade. Both were U.S. citizens. They studied and took the exam. Oh, my father did it before I was born, I think. My mother...I can’t remember when she took it.

As long as I can remember, we had a car. And my mother drove, mostly. Dad went to work by bus and come home by bus. He drove, too, once in a while. When he

18 According to St. Ambrose’s Catholic Grade School records, Lena Porti attended the third grade during the fall of 1914 and the spring of 1915. She would have been twelve years old at the time. There is no other record of her continuing her education past this time. According to Church records, the family first came to Des Moines in 1911 and lived on 2nd and Grand, downtown. They moved to Chestnut Street which is where they were living in 1914. In 1918, they moved to Pleasant Street where they remained. According to an older cousin, Lena’s family left Italy the year of her birth in 1902 and immigrated to Kingston, New York. They stayed there for nine years before moving to Des Moines.
went hunting, stuff like that. To the extent that Mom drove, it was probably kind of unusual. Most Italian older women were home. There were no two car families back then.

I vaguely remember my grandparents. Well, they came from Italy. My grandfather Frank, I just barely, barely, barely remember him in my memory. Most thing I remember about him was when he lost his head. Lost his mind. He just became, what do you call it, a mental case. He’d run away. They caught him down on Keosaqua one time. That didn’t last too long, and he died. I don’t know how old he was. I don’t know what was wrong with him because I was pretty young. I can remember him sitting in the basement, acting funny. Well, I could just tell that there was something wrong with him. He really wasn’t, he wasn’t all there. I don’t know if they even put him in an institution. I don’t think they did. He died very shortly after this all happened to him.

Francis

I always kind of felt like my dad held our family together because my mother was going through menopause, and she was a witch\(^\text{19}\). Really bad. My dad used to really make it bearable. He used to come in the bedroom and console us whenever she’d abused us or something. I don’t mean physically, but mentally. So he was always the kind of guy that kept the boat on an even keel all the time. My mother was high-strung. Well, my dad was real quiet.

But you know, at the same token, my dad used to spend hours standing out in

\(^{19}\)This is the first of many inconsistencies between the siblings. According to Michael, their mother is a saint. To Francis, she is a witch. It is not for us to judge whether she is a saint or a witch. It is more important to note the disparity. Each sibling’s response to the people and events in their lives are influenced by the following factors: 1) who and what they were in their childhoods, and 2) who and what they are today. Even in a family, there are a series of complex events based on hereditary and upbringing that create individual cosmology and personalities. It would be wrong to assume that one perception is more “true” than another, but more important, to explore possible reasons for the conflicting views.
front of our house on Pleasant Street. And everybody that came by knew him, and he knew them. And he would talk to them by the hour. That doesn’t really sound like an introvert, does it? I think maybe, the fact that he wasn’t really well educated kind of hampered him. God, but he sure worked hard. Very hard.

My dad wore a size seven shoe. So you can imagine how small he was. He wasn’t very big. I suppose he was about five foot six. I know he was taller than Joe. And he was not heavy at all. As a matter of fact, he was built very slight and he had blue eyes. Michael has blue eyes, too. I was always thought maybe Dad’s people had snuck up in Switzerland and Germany.

Dad worked at the grocery store. My dad used to get up every morning about three thirty, four in the morning, go to the store, open it, start cutting meat. And then in the afternoon, he always took a nap about for an hour or so every afternoon. Or maybe that was a habit he brought over from Italy. I never knew. I do know that he had a nap. He was an excellent butcher. The best. He was exceedingly honest, especially in dealing with people in the store. I mean if somebody would give him a penny too much, he’d make sure that they got it back. My dad was a real fine person. And I think he was dominated by my mother. I always felt like all the girls in the family dominated their husbands. My Aunt Laura did and Aunt Emma did. ‘Course my mom, I think of all the girls, she was the most, oh, bossy. That’s a good word.

My dad could have done anything he wanted to do. Well, when you consider how my dad even got to this country. Well, I can only tell you the story of how he got here from a standpoint of when we went there. We went to Belsito, and I looked at that countryside, and I realized what it took for us to get there. Which was simply driving a car. And he left there on his feet. And how he ever made it to the sea, and to a ship, he was only seventeen years old. I had a lot of respect for my dad. Saw what he did. But it didn’t surprise me. Very resolute. So he was born in 1888.

What would make him leave? My dad had a lot of initiative as far as I remember. And he went all alone, and then he worked his way across the United States. He was
eventually come here. But he didn’t have any money. So he landed at Ellis Island and got a job at the railroad and worked his way back. No, my father never did tell stories about Italy and his life before he moved to Des Moines. Now my father-in-law, he told all kinds of stories. My dad was, he didn’t think about the past. I used to ask him, “Did you ever want to go back to Italy?” And he’d say, “No.” He wouldn’t embellish.

My mother was a witch. Maybe that’s just my attitude about her. ‘Cause she and Michael got along like coffee and cream. And maybe it’s ‘cause he was the oldest. I used to break my ass to do something for my mom, and she would just completely ignore it. So I always felt a lot more kindred with my dad. When I went to college and played golf and we came over here to play Drake in Des Moines, my dad was at the game and my mother wasn’t. It was just stuff like that. And it wasn’t that she couldn’t. It was on a day when she could have done it. It was on Sunday.

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My mother had a tremendous personality. And the thing that used to gripe Michael and I when we were growing up and in the store. If my mother, if we were gonna have maybe steak for dinner and she had an opportunity to sell it, she’d sell it. And we’d make do with something else. Oh, she used to wait hand and foot on the customers at the store. And if one of us kids wouldn’t do the same thing, we’d get punished. My mother was a real bombastic individual. She would do more for people outside our family than she would do for us. And course we used to get a little angry about that. Yeah, I suppose I sound like I didn’t appreciate my mom. And to be honest with you, I didn’t appreciate her like I did my dad. My dad had a big effect on me. He really did.

However, if it hadn’t have been for my mom, we probably would have starved to death. My mom was the grocery store. That was it. She was the grocery store. If it hadn’t been for her, we couldn’t have kept the store open, I don’t think.

When my mother would walk in that wholesale house, everybody would be at her beck and call. And they would always save special things aside for her that they knew that she would buy because they thought it was something that Lena would like, you
know. We went down there, and we always got the red carpet treatment because of her. She could make something out of nothing. When my mother bought lettuce, for instance, the outside of the lettuce would be rotten. And she’d bring it home, and we’d take and strip off all the rotten parts and clean it all up, and when we got down to the green, fresh, and then we’d sell it. Now they didn’t, at the wholesale house, they’d throw that crate out. But the guys got to know my ma, and knew how she operated, so they thought, this is something that we can recover. “Lena would like that, so we’ll just save it.” They charged her very little for it. Very little. And that’s the way my mom made their living.

My dad did whatever my mother wanted. My dad was so mild. He knew if he didn’t, it was gonna be a losing proposition, so he just go along with the flow, you know. My mother couldn’t be married to anybody else but my dad. They wouldn’t have put up with her. When my dad came to Des Moines, he actually knew who he was going to marry. ‘Cause they planned it for him. I don’t think my mother was ever really in love with my dad. I really don’t. My mother once told Genevieve that she married my dad because she felt sorry for him. I think Dad was in love with her. Yeah, I think he was. There was such a big discrepancy in their age. She was more like his daughter than his wife. ‘Cause I think she was, what seventeen? And he was thirty-two.

You know, I don’t ever recall my mother even screaming at my dad. He was not the kind of person who you would scream at. Because he was, I don’t want to say, passive. He was pretty smart, he would more or less stay out of her way. ‘Cause he knew she was a bitch. Dad was always interceding with us kids because of my mother’s rampages and she would yell at us. And he knew how it hurt us, so he was always telling, “Don’t worry about it. She’ll be okay.” I sort of felt sorry for him.

We always thought my dad was real sickly all his life, and that it was ironic that my mother would die when she was fifty, and he was seventy-three when he died. She died in ‘53, and he died in ‘60. Same time of the year. And when she died, I suppose he’d taken all that screaming for so many years, he felt like he’d been liberated. But he really did love her. He was a pretty lonely guy.
My relationship with my dad was perfect. I can remember when I got married, he took me out in the backyard and he said, “Francis, now that you’re married, if you’re gonna have any problems, it’ll probably be because of the money. So don’t let your wife handle the money, ‘til you’re sure she can handle it. Okay?” I says, “Ok.”

My dad never laid his hands on me or any of the other kids, that I know of. But my mother, that was another story. My mother used to get so violently angry that once she bit me in the shoulder with her teeth. I had teeth marks on this muscle right here. She’d get so violently angry. And sometimes, we’d wonder what she was punishing us for, and she’d tell us it was because it was something that we did that she didn’t know about. When my dad drank, he was even more mild than when he didn’t. When I was a little kid, once in a while, he would have too much to drink and get on the floor and play with us. I remember we used to crawl on his back and walk around the room like a horse. We used to do that. To say he drank, I would say he only drank socially. He wouldn’t drink at all around the house. But, if he were over somewhere and someone else was drinking, he’d have a drink.

Dad and his buddies used to play this card game. They usually played on Sundays. And they used to have partners. And they used to play for what they called the padrone, the boss. The padrone would be the boss of the bottle. And it was real cold-blooded, really. Because, then he would have another guy that came in second. That was lieutenant. The padrone could hand, offer a drink to anybody at the table, as long as the lieutenant okayed it. Now the lieutenant couldn’t offer to anybody, only the boss. So if you didn’t, if the lieutenant didn’t like somebody, and my dad would, if he were the padrone would offer somebody a glass, the guy says nothing doing. He didn’t get any. (laughter) That used to be more fun than the game. Us kids used to sit around, and we’d just get the biggest kick out of that. And think, “How cold-hearted can this guy be, not give him a drink.” ‘Cause it was my uncles, you know. It was just a male game. The women weren’t even around. They’d be off somewhere else. Oh, off in another room, talking. We just loved to watch those games.
I can tell you one thing about my mother that I just happened to think of, and maybe the others don’t agree. My mother was not very affectionate. I don’t think I ever remember my mother even kissing me. When I got married, and I saw how Genevieve’s family were with one another, I thought, “That’s strange.” But Ma told Genevieve once, that she didn’t know why, but she never could do that. Mary Terese and I were just like that, affectionate physically. My mother was not at all. My mother was rather cold-blooded. Now Michael would probably tell you something different. Now she was probably real affectionate with John because John was sick.

Well, I was kind of like the guy that’s running and the harder he ran, the further behind he got, the more I tried. I used to come home and I used to do the dishes for her. I remember when we were living on Harding Road, and we had a fire in the house, and I put the fire out. As a matter of fact, they used to call me the fireman. I put the fire out. My mother would never acknowledge it. My mother never acknowledged a thing I did. Nothing. So after a while, I just gave up. Did she acknowledge the things other people did? Maybe Michael, but I wouldn’t know about that. I do know that she and John were pretty close because he was sick.

My father’s job around the house was to take care of the furnace, shoveled the coal, and stuff like that. That was not considered women’s work. But as far as cleaning or cooking or stuff like that, he didn’t do any of that. I tell you one thing about her, she always made my dad a meal. Always.

My mother was not a very good housekeeper. Not very good. I don’t remember our house being dirty, but I don’t ever remember her doing a lot of housework. I mean, us kids used to do most of it. Not from her direction, just because it needed to be done. You wanted dessert, you’ve got to pick up off the floor.

I never knew my grandparents. All I remember about my grandparents is their funeral. Well, my grandfather I never knew at all. He was dead before I came to the age of reason, but my grandmother, they used to have the wakes in the house in those days. We lived next to the grocery store on Pleasant Street. The casket was in the house, they
didn’t use a funeral home. And I remember they used to wail and cry and that sort of thing. But as far as us kids, we were always shoved in the background. That was our role, we didn’t mind. We had fun. Not just my family. That was all Italian kids. I particularly remember when Michael and I used to walk to school. This kid, Italian kid, lived on our way to school, his brother got in trouble with the law and got shot. And so he was killed. And they had his funeral, and Michael and I, two days of the wake, we would hate to walk by that house because of all the wailing and crying. Should have been more like the Irish.

My parents, neither one, had a dialect. My dad spoke excellent English. ‘Course, my mother did, too. They spoke in Italian all the time. They didn’t encourage us to learn it. Oh, no. In other words, if they wanted to say something about us, they would say it in Italian. Or about anything they didn’t want us to hear. They would always speak in Italian. Otherwise, they spoke in English. So the Italian was reserved for them. They were never particularly interested that we learn Italian.

Mary Terese

My mother was strictly a business person, she wasn’t a family-oriented person. On Saturdays, I used to go with her down to the market and to the wholesale houses where she did all the buying. I remember her beatin’ the hell outta me when I got home too late from a movie. I was probably about ten or twelve. I’d gone to the Varsity and I sat through it twice. She was good at hitting. She hit a lot.

My mother was chunky. She had black hair. She usually wore it, well back then. She wore it in a bun at the back of her head. She had a nose like mine, ugly. She wasn’t a really beautiful person. She could look really nice when she dressed up. Always remember her in an apron, a store apron. She had brown eyes; we all have

Mary Terese had a stroke four years earlier. Although she is easily understood, it has effected her overall speech patterns causing her to stutter at times and repeat words. I removed some of this so that her sections would flow more smoothly.
brown...Michael’s got blue eyes. We don’t know where they came from. My mother and dad both had brown eyes. Mom was about five foot three to five foot four. She mostly wore house dresses. But, when she dressed up, she looked real nice. She had pretty hats.

My mother didn’t do much around the house. Before I got old enough to do it, she had a lady that used to do our washing and ironing. Housework wasn’t her life. She ran a grocery store. I think my grandparents used to own the grocery store. The grocery store was attached to my grandparent’s house. But you couldn’t go in from the store to the house. We never moved there until my grandmother died and then we bought the house from Mom’s other brothers and sisters.

My mother did all the buying. She loved fruits and vegetables. That was her life. She loved to fix fruits and vegetables in the display in the front. Oh, she used to buy at the grocery wholesale. Also, we used to go to the market, the old city market. That was fun.

Mother would get up ‘bout, I suppose she’d get up about six and fix our breakfast. Then she’d go down to the market ‘cuz my dad would go to the store. When we were young, she was always home for us after school. We had people that used to take care of us in the summertime. Somebody had to be there with us, and they took care of us. I think they got paid three dollars a week, plus room and board. She always had somebody there taking care of us. My mother wasn’t a Stay-at-HOME-and-Take-Care-of-her-Kids Mom. She would’ve been good, big in the ERA, for equal rights for women, or whatever you call it. She would rather have been working than taking care of kids.

My mother was good at getting connected with people. I mean she was very sharp when it come to anything like that. All those guys at the wholesale house were crazy about my mother. They were very good to her, and if they had a bushel of apples that weren’t too good, you know, they’d give ‘em to her, just give ‘em to her. Then my mother’d come home and she’d bake all these pies and take them down to the guys at the wholesale house. She wasn’t flirtatious, but my mother LOVED MEN. She just loved being around ‘em and got along with them very well.
I always thought she favored the boys. She loved my brothers. Michael was the king of the hill. He was a very fussy eater. If Michael didn’t like something, she’d always fix him something different. The rest of us, we ate whatever she cooked. She wasn’t a loving mother. I don’t ever remember her hugging or being affectionate. I don’t know if she loved me.

My dad was a very quiet person. He never hollered at us. He never hit us. My mother controlled the money. She paid all the bills and he never questioned anything that she did. He liked to hunt and fish, and play cards, and take a little nap now and then. My grandparents never wanted my mother to marry him, ‘cuz he was quite a bit older. He was about fourteen years older than my mother. My grandfather just didn’t like my dad, so Dad always said he didn’t. Mom met Dad through Ange Rua, she was a friend of my folks for years. They had a big wedding. No, it wasn’t a maschiata. I mean he didn’t have any family here. Who were they gonna fix it up with?

Dad wasn’t too much taller than my mother. He was always bald. He wasn’t a big person. He wasn’t heavy set or anything. He was a smaller person than my mother. At the grocery store, he cut meat. He didn’t do anything else. He was a beautiful butcher. People’d come from all over the city to buy meat. He’d open the store up at maybe eight o’clock. The meat case was beautiful. He cut you know, steaks and pork chops and all that kinda stuff. That’s all he did!

They both respected each other, you know. I don’t remember them fighting a lot. I remember vaguely a couple of arguments. Basically my mother did whatever she wanted to do. You know he wasn’t the kind of a person who said “You gotta do this or you do that, or stay home.” They weren’t a typical couple because my mother wasn’t a stay-home mother. Well, Aunt Emma wasn’t either. Mom always had to work, because

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21 A cousin in Belsito said the same thing about Lena’s father’s dislike of John Porti, giving much the same reasoning.

22 An arranged marriage.
my dad was always sickly. He always had stomach trouble. I can remember my dad sitting in the chair or laying on the sofa. He always had a newspaper by the side of the sofa. He’d spit in it. I used to hate that. If we were in the kitchen talking, my dad would come down the big long hall, stand at the door of the kitchen and rub his stomach. My mother’d say, “What’s the matter John?” “Oh,” he’d say, “I’m sick.” She’d say, “D’you want this d’you want that?” Then he’d go back and sit down in the chair. This was when they were older. He always had somethin’er other wrong with him.

They had this group of friends and they’d take turns going to each other’s house. They used to have dances in the house. These three little old men used to play the mandolin and one played a triangle. My mother used to make me dance with all those old men, friends of hers. We didn’t have carpeting. They just roll up the rugs and they danced. They used to have a lotta fun. They used to play cards a lot with these friends. They used to have a boss and a under boss, they’d played a game. The boss would ask the under boss, “Who’s gonna get to have the drink?” They played for drinks. Wine usually. One time my mother was the boss and my dad won and my mother drank the whole bottle of wine ‘cuz she wasn’t gonna let my dad drink. Dad was the under boss. I couldn’t understand how that went but the boss controlled the liquor. My mother used to play with the guys and we used to get together at different houses. It was mostly Italians.

Both, my mother and dad, they would speak Italian when they didn’t want us to know what they were talking about. When they talked to their other Italian friends, they talked Italian a lot. Otherwise it was English. Course my dad spoke very broken English. One thing that a lot of the older Italian men couldn’t do but my dad could, was read and write. He was a terrible writer, but he could read and write. I think he just learned himself. My dad used to send, uh, a lotta money over to the old country. Well, I don’t

Mary Terese is the only sibling that mentions her mother’s participation in these card games. Card playing is a very important social activities for the Porti family. All my aunts and their cousins play with some regularity and quite competitively.
know why they didn’t teach us Italian.

I don’t remember my grandfather at all. But I remember my grandmother. She had...white hair...and, ah, she’s a little short lady. We loved my grandmother because she kept us from getting hit a lot. I was young when she died, about eleven years old. We didn’t even know she had died. People were strange. My mother didn’t come home for a couple a days and then she came home. We had to all get dressed up and they had her body laid out at the house on Pleasant street. They had these bay windows. That’s where they had the coffin. My mother took us all down there and she made us go kiss her. We were petrified. We’d never seen anybody deader. For a whole year, we weren’t allowed to play the radio, and we had no Christmas tree at our house. They wore black for a whole year and mourned for a whole year. That year, we had our Christmas tree at Maude’s. Maude, she’s a lady that took care of Joe when he was little.

Nonna was a funny lady. She wasn’t a business person, like my mother. I think she was more of a home body. She wore long dresses and always had an apron on. She wore her hair and had white hair. It was always kind of in a bun. I think most of the old Italian ladies wore their hair in buns on the back. We kids used to fight a lot. Michael was always the instigator. He used to slap us around a lot and then I’d call my mother at the store and say, “Mama, Michael hit me,” or “This one did this or that.” She’d say “Just wait’ll I get home.” If I knew we were in big trouble, I’d call Gramma, and say, “Nonna, can you come home with Mama?” And she’d say “What’d you do now?!?” Nonna wouldn’t let her hit us when she was there. Most of the time Mama came home with a board and a piece of orange crate as a stick. Boy, it stung. We’d run, and if anybody got caught, good luck! We hid under the bed mostly.

I got along with my mother, but it was just that I can’t explain it. I didn’t feel very close to my mother. I mean she was very kind and good to people. As far as that

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24It is not uncommon for Italian mothers to have conflict with their oldest daughters. For a good discussion of the reasons behind this sort of conflict read Elizabeth Johnson’s (1982) “Role Expectations and Role Realities of Older Italian Mothers and Their Daughters.”
goes, she was kind of a cold person. She just wasn’t the kind of person who you would hug. I understand the way she was. She had to be the way she was because my father was the way he was. She had to run the business because he cut the meat and that was all that he was responsible for. She had to do all the ordering and go down to the wholesale and do all the ordering and he was strictly the butcher. He never interfered with anything she did. Like when she smacked us around. Never questioned anything.

Mother’s favorite child was Michael, Francis, Johnny, Joey, Joanne. Everybody but me. (laughter) My dad’s favorite...Joanne. I mean he just he babied her a lot, he named her, and ah, I dunno.

If you talk to anybody about my mother, they’d always say, you know, she was such a wonderful person. I mean there was people even on the Southside here, that she’d always see to it, that they had food. She was a very giving person, not to me. Anything Lucille or Genevive wanted, she’d give it to ‘em. I never got anything from her. There are things I wouldn’t tell anybody that I’ve always felt very bad about, but, it doesn’t do any good to tell anybody about it. It isn’t gonna change anything.

**John**

Mother was working all the time. That’s mainly what I remember. She was short. Stout. Happy. Quick. Always doing something. She was always nice to me and never grumpy or on my back or anything. That, to a child, is a happy parent. Early on, I really didn’t see much of my mother. She was busy working. And I know up to the time I was in third or fourth grade, why, I was with the baby sitter most of the time. It was an Italian girl. I think she was a relative, a distant relative.

My mother was the manager of the store. My father and she were the only ones that worked there, outside of the kids. But my father’s only role was behind the meat

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25I met this uncle for the first time when I traveled to Portland, Oregon, to interview him. You will notice that he talks to me as if the members of his family are unfamiliar to me. It is interesting to contrast this with the intimate friendly tone of the other siblings toward me.
counter. He was the butcher. He took care of things behind the meat counter and she’d stock the shelves. A big part of it was going everyday to the wholesale market, to buy the produce and arranging that on the shelf. She took care of the bookkeeping. Waited on the people.

I think the grocery store was her father’s before them and then they inherited it. I don’t really know what point in life. The only story I remember about my grandfather was that he was fairly well off. Left them this house and the grocery store which was a pretty good estate in those days. I think her father died when I was just very, very young. And I think at that point we probably took over the store. I don’t know why she got it rather than any of the other siblings. They were all pretty well out on their own at that time. Maybe she had worked there. My dad had. I don’t know.

One of my favorite memories of childhood was going to the market with my mother. I think this was after I was in high school and my older brothers had left and they were at war. She and I would get in the old panel truck and we would go downtown to the area where there were always wholesale distributors. She’d walk around, we’d look at things and she would bargain with the salesmen. They all knew her. She was sorta well looked upon. I would just tag along. I thought it was all very interesting, very enjoyable. We’d spend a whole morning doing this. When we got back, of course, we’d unload all the stuff, put the fruit out and take care of everything. So I had very fond memories of going to the markets with my mother.

I remember one day my mother and I going to the wholesale markets to buy things. They had a truck load of potatoes that were going bad. Have you ever smelled a rotten potato? It smells terrible. So my mother looked at that bag of potatoes, and she opened the bag and she looked in. She said to the salesman who came along, “What are you going to do with those potatoes? They are all going rotten.” He said, “Oh, I’ll have him take them out and dump them.” And she asked me, “Do you want those potatoes? You could probably sort those out and make money. Just sort out the good ones because they aren’t all rotten.” I said, “Sure.” She would have this truck bring the bags of
potatoes up to the store. Behind the store then, we unloaded them and then I spent a couple of days sorting out all these rotten potatoes. And I made quite a bit of money. And she gave me the money. Which I thought was really neat. I must have made fifteen or twenty dollars. That was a lot of money in those days.

I think even at that time, I thought she was very atypical. I had great admiration for her. I would go on the expeditions to the market with her everyday and I could see she really knew what was going on and she did well at it. I always felt that she was an exceptional woman, very bright, very industrious and how she could raise a family and do all that too, why, it was beyond me. Although later on, I realize she didn’t do quite as good a job with her family as I thought she did26.

I think Mother’d get up in the morning and take care of things around the house as well as she could. My father usually got up VERY early and he was long gone before anybody else got up. And then, I think she would sort of arrange for doing required things around the house. Then she would leave. And then she wouldn’t get back until evening. She may or may not have had time to cook when she got home in the evening but managed to arrange for something to be done for keeping the family running. My father didn’t get home ‘til eight or nine o’clock at night after he closed the store.

Oh, occasionally mother would, I wouldn’t say discipline, I don’t ever recall being struck or anything like that. Occasionally she would get angry and yell or something like that. I think she had a temper but I think it was very difficult to expose. It went a long way before she would get angry. I think she was more apt to devour my sister who was a year older than I, Mary Terese. Or my older brothers. Rarely on me. I could get away with about anything.

My mother was very affectionate with me. Of course, young boys at that age

26 John is not the first family to suggest that Lena and John were not the best parents. It is interesting that they are judging their upbringing by today’s standards of what a nuclear family is supposed to be using language like “dysfunctional” which became popularized during the talk show media blitz of the 1980s.
don’t like to be hugged or kissed or anything. I don’t think she did it to... I don’t recall her being affectionate to my sisters. But she was to me and I think she was... I don’t remember much of the relationship between her and Michael, the oldest son. I always felt Michael was unfortunate to be the oldest and I think a lot of responsibilities lit on him that Frank and I avoided simply because of our place in the family. I think she was affectionate for us two at the very least.

Mother wasn’t overly generous. And she wasn’t mean either. Normally so, I would say. But give to people who would come around who were needful. I thought she was normally generous. Not overly so and not underly so. Always had a very excellent relationship with a lot of the people who used the grocery store who were actually probably a social status above her. She had very good relationships with them. I think they all admired her because it was unusual for a woman to be working and raising a big family like that. I think that she got a lot of respect that she normally wouldn’t have had.

I know she had a relationship with the owners of the KRNT theater but I didn’t know exactly who it was. She had a relationship with a lot of people of that type, who I say, were actually probably socially above her level, but they liked her. I know my mother used to when they had something down at the theater. She would get free tickets, and I’d go with her occasionally if there was something I wanted to see. I was impressed that they would meet my mother at the door and take us down the aisle right to the front and bring out a couple of chairs and we would actually sit in the front row. I was impressed. I didn’t know why these people would do this for her. This was something we would have done otherwise, because we probably couldn’t have afforded the seats.

My early memory of my father is sort of a quiet man who rarely spoke. He was rarely around when we were young because he was working. He disappeared early in the morning and didn’t get back until late at night. We saw very little of him. I remember him coming home and Mother would get him something to eat, pour a glass of wine, have fresh tomatoes. Occasionally he’d have friends over and they’d play cards and he’d drink a little at that time. I think occasionally he’d get a little bit high but he was never out of
line. I just have this picture of my father sharpening his knives or scrubbing the butcher block.

I loved to sit around and watch them play games. I remember the game that I enjoyed the most was the game that I don’t know exactly the mechanics of the card game but it was a very quick little game. You deal several cards and you sort of had a partner although he wasn’t a full partner. And the winner of the game won like a bottle of wine. What he won was that bottle of wine, and he could either drink it all himself, if he wanted. There was also a set boss who was sort of the person who came in second. They were semi-partners. He was the set boss. So you could drink this bottle of wine, if you wanted. This was all going on with much hilarity and talking and that. First of all, you’d pour yourself a glass of wine, you see, and these other men were sitting around and they all obviously would like a glass too. You’d make a great thing about how you were going to drink this wine and they didn’t have any. Then, you might offer a glass to the set boss. But he couldn’t drink unless you gave it to him. You might give him a glass. Or if you wanted to give a glass to somebody else, maybe somebody had done you a favor during the game or you like somebody, but you couldn’t give them a glass unless the set boss agreed. So there was a lot of bargaining going on. “Well, how about if I give Joe a glass?” “Well, I don’t know. How about giving me a glass,” the set boss would say. So, you give him a glass and he gives me a glass. “Well, I think I’ll have a glass myself and think about things.” This would go on and on for twenty, twenty-five minutes until the bottle of wine was gone and they they’d play another hand. The same way. Whoever won was the boss. I remember we children used to play it, only we’d use a bottle of ginger ale. Most of their conversation was in Italian. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. But that simple conversation you could understand just from the gestures and that. It was a mixture of Italian and English. They got together to play cards on weekends. Saturday, or Sunday. Sunday was the day for visiting. That was the only day the store wasn’t open. A little later on it was even open on Sundays. When times got very tough.
My mother and father spoke Italian to each other. I don’t think any of the children ever spoke it. I think Michael picked up a little of it being the oldest. But I don’t think he picked up very much. And the rest of us, no. My mother never talked Italian to us. It was strictly English. Between the two of them they would speak Italian quite easily. If she wanted to say something they didn’t want us to understand, she would tell him in Italian. And the friends that came, mostly Italian was spoken. But it was English in the store. Dealing with an English clientele. I don’t think Italian was used in the store.

I don’t think they encouraged or discouraged us from learning Italian. They certainly didn’t encourage it. I can’t ever recall them actively discouraging it. I think there is a conscious effort for them to Americanize their children as quickly as possible. At least on my mother’s part. I’m not so sure on my father’s part.

Dad was a short man, sort of bald. I would say he had an average build. He wasn’t thin. He wasn’t bulky at all. Not any weight problem. Smoked a lot. Everyone did in those days. I can’t ever remember raising his voice to me. Actually, I always felt that my mother was raising us and he was just there to provide the money through work in the store.

Oh, I think he was an excellent butcher. In fact, in those days you got a very small little store, big meat case and when you bought a piece of beef you bought either a hind quarter or a fore quarter and they would bring it in the big meat truck and bring it in and it would hang there until you would be able to cut it all up and dispose of it. It was a lot of work. You had to cut it up in order to get it under refrigeration. I always had the idea that he was an excellent butcher. My remembrances of him are him down there working at the butcher block. A big wooden block, scrub it down when he got done, all those knives he had to sharpen. I always thought it was very skilled labor.

I think mom and dad were a good team. I’m not sure how much affection was there. There was mutual respect. I never recall them fighting. They mostly spoke Italian. I think she called him Giovanni. I’m not sure what he called her.

My relationship to my father was...we didn’t have much of a relationship with him.
I think I realized very young that my mother ran things and if you wanted something, you had to get it through Mom. From Mother. And Father just didn't play much of a role in determining what I did or what was given to me and didn't contribute much to my actions. I never interfered with him and I was very respectful. I felt that I shouldn't cross him but I just knew that my mother was the one that sort of ran things. She was the one I looked upon as a real parent for my parenting, really.

I think we had a lot of affection and respect for my mother. When I was very young, I thought she was very bright and she was everything. She was Mother and Father and everything. I talked to her, I think as much as young people talk to their mothers. She never tried to really offer me any advice. I think she realized that I was growing up in a different world than she knew of and so she was smart enough to know this and not to control me. I can't ever recall her ever forbidding me to do something. She might question a little but she would always go along with what I thought was all right. Well, if I decided to go somewhere or do something, she would ask a few questions but she would never say, "Well, I don't think that's a good place for you to go." She would never say that. She might give me a few cautionary words but she never tried to interfere, especially in school. She thought I was very bright and I could manipulate her by reason. She thought I was very bright and so any question that involved my education, she left entirely up to me. If I wanted something, I knew how to get it, or if I didn't want to do something, I usually knew how I could sort of play it so I could get out of doing it.

I don't think there was any question I was my mother's favorite child. I think it was because I was successful. I mean, I think these immigrants have this urge that their children would be successful in America. She saw this promise in me more than anyone else. Also my two older brothers I think, the older one, Michael, I think, had the disadvantage he was the oldest so he had to do a certain amount of work. Frank and I had a lot of free time and we had more time to go fishing and to do well the things she admired. So I mean I always got the idea from my mother that I was better than anyone else. No, I don't think Father had any favoritism of any kind.
Around the house. I think Dad’s responsibility mainly was to run that store for fourteen, fifteen hours a day. Six days a week. And Sunday, he didn’t do very much. He’d work in the garden, visit with his friends. My mother’s job was to put food on the table, keeping clean and making sure the children were doing what they were supposed to be doing. Everything was her responsibility. But she did have hired help. She was working and at that time it was relatively easy to get people to come in and do things for very little...cheap labor. I think it was relatively unique to have hired help. I think it was and she was successful but she had enough money that she could afford this. And mother kept busy at other things and did not have time for housework.

I was never expected to do any of the cleaning. I think that was because I was a boy. Because I was also a favored boy. The girls were never expected to do well in school, whereas the boys were. Hope of the future.

Joey

Well, you see, I was different than any of the rest of them. I didn’t live at home ‘til I was in high school. Well, I was the fifth of seven children. And they come along in a steady flow – 1920, ‘21, ‘23, ‘26, and 1928. So, uh, she had her hands full by the time I came along, so I lived with the family called Maude and George Nelson. How they ever met ‘em or what, I stayed there every day, during the week. I used to go home on the weekends. So, I don’t have any early recollections of them until I got home. Well, I was twelve years old, and when I graduated high school, I was barely sixteen. Sixteen in February and graduated in May. So I was twelve years old before I lived at home.

I used to be fascinated to watch Pop cut meat. ‘Cause he was an artist cutting it. He wouldn’t last in a market today for nothing ‘cause he, it had to be just so. When he made ground meat, he took all the fat off of the meat. He weighed up the lean and then

\[27\text{Uncle Joey would not discuss Maude and George Nelson in any depth. Anytime I would ask him of his experience in their home, he would change the subject.}\]
he put so much fat in it and then he ground it. But he was that way, and I used to, the store was about as big as these two rooms put together. And I used to get a one hundred pound bag of sugar and I’d crawl up there and sit on Saturday mornings when I’d be home and watch him cut meat. He used to make his own butcher knives. He’d take a big file, one you file metal with. And a bucket of water and a little old grindstone and he’d start grinding on this steel. Well, if he felt it was getting too hot, he’d cool it off in the water so it wouldn’t lose it’s temper. He’d just keep grinding it down ‘til he had a twelve inch knife, or fourteen, whatever it was. And then he’d make a wooden handle and rivet it to it. And they were just like razors. He’d just, in fact, I wish I had one. It had a wooden handle. To make a handle, that’s no big deal. He taught himself how to butcher. He just, in those days, you did what you had to do.

My pop was a very, very quiet man. At least around us, he was. He didn’t go to church, but he wouldn’t let us miss Mass. We’d go hunting or fishing every, practically every Sunday of the year. And he’d wake us up for five o’clock Mass. And when we got back, then we’d go. He was the boss. (chuckle) We never questioned him. You didn’t question your parents in those days.

I think he got up to go, I think he probably opened about six o’clock. ‘Cause the milkman would come. He’d usually work ‘til two or three in the afternoon. And we got home from school, and then he, he’d usually take off, go in the house or into his garden or whatever. I don’t know what he did. I don’t remember.

Pops and I got along well. And like I say, he was a very quiet guy. He never, wouldn’t give you hell for anything. He just did his thing, and we worked. I got along fine with him. Pop was a very quiet person. He’d talk to ‘em. He was pleasant to ‘em, but he had no interaction with ‘em. He, from when I was a little kid, he had had throat trouble and he didn’t talk real well. He couldn’t communicate real well. So he, he was very quiet that way. Not that I would, I would call that Pops have an accent. No. To me, he was a very quiet man and when I was real young and before I had even moved back home, he a throat problem and had that gravely voice. So he was not very
communicative. But he got along with those people. Pops didn’t have a favorite child. We were all treated alike. My dad was a very quiet guy. He never, never, made any waves. Just, he was always there.

Pops took care of the garden is the only thing I ever knew that he did around the house. I don’t think he ever washed a dish. I don’t know if I ever remember him ever cooking anything. Well, after I was home, when I was eleven or twelve years old, Mom cooked. Mary Terese cooked. And Ma would take care of the store. I don’t recall what we ate for a breakfast or lunch, but we always had a nice dinner. At least twice a week, we had spaghetti. Thursday and Sunday. Friday it was pasta and bread crumbs.

My mom and dad spoke Italian all the time, but they didn’t, they didn’t speak a lot to us because most of their association with them was in the store, and they had to speak English because their clientele was English. We didn’t live in the Italian part of town. We didn’t have any Italian customers. They didn’t encourage or discourage us from speaking Italian. Michael can speak it. Mary Terese can speak it. I don’t think Francis can. We could tell when they were mad at us. (laughter) We knew all the cuss words.

All I can remember was my mom was little fireplug that used to get in that old Chevy panel truck and go down to the wholesale house and bring the groceries home and prepare the food list. Ma looked like a bowling ball. She was four foot ten and weighed two hundred pounds, probably. Oh, real dark hair. Very round face. Very pleasant lady. Pleasant lady. She’d get up and work all day in the store. That’s what they both did.

I got along fine with Mom. No problems. But like I say, see, I didn’t live at home for the first twelve years or eleven years. Well, sure it was difficult when I moved back home. I don’t think she had a favorite child. If we had it coming, we all had a whippin’. Did I get hit? Oh, yeah. Sure. She broke a broom over Johnny one day. He, we were fighting. Well, he was on top ‘cause he was bigger than me. And she whacked her broom and broke the handle over his back.

The only thing that I remember about my mother that she was, she was always
willing to help anybody that needed it. Nobody got turned away for a meal. And cooking was the, although she didn’t have time to do it a lot, she loved to cook. And was an excellent cook. On Sundays, we had the family over for dinner. (chuckle)

We used to tag along with Mom to the wholesale, and she bought the stuff. We didn’t have anything to do with it, but she bargained with those guys. And walk along Court Avenue in the summertime when the trucks were backed up to the curve, and all these farmers brought their stuff in. And she’d buy whatever she thought was a good deal. Mom never had an enemy in the world. Got along with everybody. She got a good deal ‘cause a good deal is when both buyer and seller are happy. And if they didn’t want to sell, she didn’t argue with them. She told ‘em what she’d give ‘em, and if they didn’t want to do it, she didn’t get mad. She’d go to the next one.

Uh, I really couldn’t say that my parents were as loving externally as I am with my wife, but I don’t think they argued a lot. I don’t ever remember them arguing. But I’m sure there was some because, I used to be good for going through drawers. And one day, I found a package of prophylactics in Mom’s bedroom. (chuckle) And I’m sure she didn’t buy ‘em. That’s why then it was a surprise when Cristine was born. I have no idea how my parents got together. I have no idea how they came to own the store.

When I was home on weekends when I was a little kid, we used to go visit these people and you’d have to drink that miserable dago red. Ma and Pops would play that card game. I remember, but it’s been so long ago, that I couldn’t play it today. And they used to play for drinks. They used to stack their cards in their hand a funny way. They’d stack ‘em on top of each other. They didn’t fan ‘em like we do now. They had four stacks in their hand. I used to like to watch them play that game. Weekends and summers were the only time I spent at home.

Joan

My earliest memory of my mother is probably when I was going to start pre-
school at the academy. I just vaguely remember her telling Mary Terese that she had to take me to a pre-school at St. Joseph’s academy for three and four year old, I think. But I didn’t go a full year, though. So she had to take me every day. I just remember mother telling her that was to be her job. So my first memory of my mother is, well, putting Mary Terese, more or less, in charge of me.

Up until the time she got sick, I probably didn’t have too much of a relationship with my mother. Um, I don’t know that we ever talked. I had more of a relationship with Mary Terese. In fact, if I wanted to do something, I would ask my mother. She’d tell me to go ask Mary Terese. When she started getting sick, I was maybe a sophomore in high school, fourteen.

I might have talked back to Mary Terese, but I don’t think I talked back much to mother, because my mother, she didn’t do it often, but they were memorable, hittings. Oh, yes. I can remember them. Every one of them. Not very many, but they were memorable. I didn’t have to do much. Maybe I got on the tail end from being mad at something else, or it could be coming home late from school when I was expected earlier. I probably deserved them, but I still remember them. I used to cry so hard that I got the hiccups. I would cry that hard. When my mother gave you a whipping, you knew you’d gotten a whipping. It was just her hand, too. There was never any thing else. I think it was a case of she would have to vent herself. I think she would lose control, yeah. I don’t think that ever happened to me more than four or five times.

Mom was probably about five foot two or five three. Stocky. But not, I wouldn’t call her fat. Black hair. Kind of a round face. She had good hands, wonderful hands. Well, she always seemed to be doing things with her hands. It was the one thing she never lost. She got sick, but she still always had the use of her hands when she didn’t have the use of doing anything else.

\[28\text{This could be interpreted as a pre-school to help working moms or it was another attempt on the part of the Catholic nuns to begin the enculturation process at an earlier age.}\]
We always had a grocery store. Or they used to have a booth down at the market in the summertime. There was always a grocery store in the family. Why I think probably my grandparents had it before my mother. She owned it and there was a period during the war that she sold it. To my Aunt Laura, her sister Laura. And then she got it back. And then ran it ‘til she got sick. And then she sold it again.

My mother was the grocery store. She ran it. She did all the ordering. She went down to the market every day to buy fruits, fruits and vegetables. She went to the wholesale house to get things. She was in charge of all the ordering. She ordered the meat, although my father did the butchering and would occasionally set up. But she basically, she would even go down to the packing house and pick out what she wanted. And I used to go with her. Mostly it was John Morrell. And she would go in the cooler and pick out whichever piece of beef she wanted. Hot dogs at that time used to come in crates in a big long roll like you see them in the movies. Pick out the pork loins.

For never having gone beyond the third grade, she could buy a crate of oranges, ask how much they were a crate, how many oranges were in a crate, and she could tell you almost instantly how much each orange cost. She was a very astute business woman. She knew how to deal. No one pulled anything on her. In fact, the other way around, she probably put things over on other people, although she was basically an honest woman.

She could get people to do things for her. I suppose you would almost call it flirting with the men at the wholesale house or the packing house. And they would throw in an extra head of lettuce or two or, you know. Things like that. She didn’t ask for it, or just because it was her. But then on the other hand, she would do things for them. She would cook them dinners or bring them down food or bake bread and bring it to them. But I don’t mean flirting in a sexual way. I just mean talking to them and appealing to their egos. They used to watch, seeing her come in, they would all race to wait on her. She was a very out-going, um, friendly.

She was genuinely generous. My mother liked to collect antiques, although she
didn’t have a lot of them. She saw something, and she would buy it. But if someone else would admire that thing, she would give it to them without a qualm, without any hesitation. She would give it to you, if you wanted it, she was that way. On Sundays, she would not, generally, the grocery store was only open ‘til noon. And she would wait until maybe eleven to eleven-thirty to go into the grocery to get meat or something for dinner. And, and she would fix whatever was left. A roast, pot roast, pork roast, she would fix it. I can remember times when she would bring something into the house, and someone would come into the grocery store, and you know, in their terms, be desperate. And my father would call my mother, and she would send it back to the store. And I suppose that some people would see that to her, that money was more important to her, but that wasn’t the point of it. If someone needed something and she had it, then their needs were more important. Customers’ needs were more important than hers. And ours.

As far as my mother’s daily routine goes, she would get up and dressed. I can’t recall her ever fixing breakfast. I don’t even know if she ate breakfast. I don’t, seldom ate breakfasts. I’ve never ate breakfast before I went to school. Then, she would go to the store to check with my dad, I suppose, if anything was needed from the meat wholesale. Then she would take off and be gone an hour or two or three to the wholesale house. And then come back. Either it would be delivered or a lot of it she would just bring back with her. If they had like lettuce that anybody else would have thrown out, she would take it and clean it all up and sell it for whatever was left. Sell it very cheaply.

She would come back and work around the store. She would go in at noon and fix lunch. She did fix lunch for us in the summer. Yeah. Um, fix lunch for my dad. We always had someone to do the laundry and someone to clean the house. The woman who did the laundry was an Italian woman. She used to come every Monday. She lived on Frances Avenue which is off of Harding Road. She used to take the streetcar. Come every Monday and do all the laundry. And then she always had someone, a variety of different women who would come and clean house and do the dishes.
Although my mother would also clean twice a year. Spring cleaning and fall cleaning. I didn’t help. Not if I could help it. Everyone who was around that she could get would help, ’cause when she cleaned, she cleaned. She would have someone even come in and, ’cause we had some wallpaper on the walls, clean the wallpaper. I’m talking about taking up the rugs and taking them outside. I remember having to pound rugs with a rug beater. And everything was scrubbed and cleaned when she got into those moods to do this. You were glad when it was done. Everything was cleaned. And she would have a variety of help besides us. Her main job around the house was cooking.

When she was sick, I agreed to go on a diet. She fixed every meal for me, sat me down, I ate it, and I left. I didn’t have to do dishes. I didn’t have to be in the kitchen and be around food. And she fixed my three meals a day. And, more or less, kept temptation out of my way. And, and would fix me good meals. And she would fix them separately from the rest of the family. I don’t even know if I ate with the rest of the family. ‘Course there wasn’t too many left around by that time either, I may have been the only one. Well, there was Cristine. But she kept me away from food because it was important to her. And that’s why I did it. I did it for her. I got down to where I was a size four.

However, I was much closer to my father. We would talk. Pa, he’s the one who always went to all my recitals, piano recitals. If I had something going on, I think maybe two things that my mother came to. My father that told me to sit down and practice the piano. Made sure that I did those things. I was just closer to him than I think he was with any of his other children. And that might have been because I was the youngest until Cristine came along.

I saw my father get angry, but not, never, I don’t ever recall him ever hitting anyone. He would just vent his anger. But I don’t, I don’t know if I ever saw him. He certainly never got angry with me. I don’t remember, I assumed he and my mother had arguments. But they didn’t argue in front of us a whole lot that I recall. If they did, they argued in Italian and I didn’t know what they were saying anyway. You could tell by the tone of their voice.
He was a quiet, unassuming man. He was short, semi-bald. Bald on top. And you, you know, around the sides. Um, I have no memory of him speaking in a normal voice 'cause his vocal cords were burnt from x-rays. My memory was he always talked in a whisper. And a hoarse whisper. I don't know when that happened to him, but I don't ever remember him speaking in a normal voice. He had a slight accent, not very pronounced. There would be certain words. Certain pronunciations that you would hear somewhat of an accent. I don't remember his eyes as blue. Someone had to have blue eyes, somewhere.

I remember one winter, and we had a terrible snow storm. And my father was in the grocery store, and he found this little black boy. I don't think he was more than six, seven or eight years old. And he was out, I don't know whether he was lost or what, 'cause it was just a terrible blizzard-like conditions. No, actually, I think the snow had stopped, but there was a lot of snow. And he brought him into the house because the poor little thing was practically frozen. And we, he closed the store and brought him in the house. We spent, we warmed him up and gave him something to eat, and he had some kind of speech impediment, so we couldn't understand a lot of what he was saying. But we finally got a phone number and a name that we thought we understood. And we called and reached his mother who was frantic, she didn't know what had happened to him. And we kept him until someone could bring him home. I don't know where the little boy came from, but I wasn't very old either. But I remember that. Dad was a very warm, kind-hearted, and I don't think he had a racist bone in his body. It didn't matter, there was someone, he saw a child that obviously needed to be taken in who was possibly lost, and he did something about it.

I don't know how they met, although it was an Italian community and they were all from basically the same part of Italy. I don't know where the romance came into it.

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This is a curious story told by both Joanne and Christine to show their parent's lack of prejudices. It makes me wonder as to the nature of black/white relations at the time. This moment obviously had an impact on the two youngest daughters.
do know that my father was seventeen years older, approximately, than my mother. My mother was only seventeen when they got married. Or younger. Uh, my grandmother liked my father. ‘Cause he was very handy around the house. He can fix anything, electrical, carpenter, anything great. My grandfather, of course, didn’t like him. My father told me this. He had my grandmother wrapped around his little finger. And my grandfather didn’t like him. I think he asked for her hand.

I think my father was probably in love with my mother. I don’t know the other way around. Um, I think they got along fairly well. My mother more or less ran things. I don’t know what it was like in the beginning. My father was an old man by the time I came along. And my mother was still fairly young. But she did run things. She was there; she was in charge. She ran the house. She ran the business. The house we lived in had apartments upstairs. She ran the apartments. She paid all the bills. He seemed to be content to have it that way. Until he got sick, several years before he died, he was still a great person to have around the house to fix things electrical or carpentry. He was just, he added on a room in our house in the back off the kitchen. Did all the carpentry and wired it and everything himself. He was very good at that.

They didn’t kiss and hug a lot. But there was a respect there, and they did enjoy doing things. They did a lot of things together. They went on vacation. They used to go down to Hot Springs, Arkansas, nearly almost every year for the baths. They had a lot of friends, they did a lot of social things. They played cards. People would come to our house, and they would go to their friend’s house. It was just a very...they were comfortable around one another. I mean, I didn’t even sense any animosity or disrespect or that kind of thing. They each had their jobs, and I think they were both perfectly content with their jobs.

They called each other John and Lena. If there were any terms of endearment, they were most probably...they talked a lot in Italian to each other. So if there were any terms of endearment, they were in Italian. I didn’t understand. Although I probably would now, but I didn’t then. I didn’t understand the Italian. But I would now. I have
learned some Italian...through the course and reading and that, I would understand more terms in Italian now than I did then when I was a little girl. Basically, I didn’t care. I was always sorry about that.

They didn’t teach us Italian because my mother, especially my mother, I think I mean, it came from her mostly. We were Americans, and, therefore, we would speak American. And as I got older, I kind of resented that almost. I wish she had, we had. I think the reason my older brothers can speak it is because my grandparents were around, and I don’t imagine they did speak much English. But mother was determined we were going to be Americans.

My parents referred to themselves as Italians. And yet they wanted, you know, they always said that we were Americans. But they were Italians. But I never thought of myself as anything but Italian.

They wrote to Italy. Especially during the World War II. That was when I knew about most of the contact, was during the war they sent bundled packages, boxes. My father and mother both would send boxes of clothes and they would send money. They would write. But mostly they would write and send money. Clothes. Mostly clothes. I don’t know if they sent any food over there or not. Because food was rationed. But a lot of clothing. And I know they sent money. To, mostly my father’s relatives, I think. And then periodically, we’d get something back. Some piece of mail. But they would never say what was in it. I don’t know that they were secretive. My mother’s philosophy was that children should be seen and not heard. So they just thought that there were certain things that children didn’t need to know. They didn’t need to know everything. They didn’t need to know bad things.

They spoke Italian when they didn’t want us to know what they were talking about. Or they were angry at somebody or something or each other. When the adults were around, they all talked Italian to each other. Like I said, my mother’s philosophy, I think this was, “Children should be seen and not heard,” and, therefore, when they had their friends we were not to intrude or to interfere or to want to play cards with them or
come and want to sit and watch. We were to go off and be by ourselves. When it came
time to eat, we could come and have something to eat but we were not to interfere with
their social activities, with the adults.

I mostly know the cuss words that I learned from my parents. I have no idea what
these things mean but I always thought they were not nice. When I am angry, they come
out. ‘Cause that’s how they would use them, my parents, that is. I have no idea what
they mean, really. That doesn’t stop me from using them.

My mother had American friends, but they were not social friends. They were
different kinds of friends. My parents and their Italian friends, many of whom were from
the same village in Italy, would play cards. They always played for money. Always.
And they were spirited games. They could get into real arguments and they would get
very excited and yell.

They were not big drinkers. It would be there if somebody would come over so
they could offer them a glass. A lot of time it was anisette. Which is a liqueur, so you
drink a very little. Sometimes some wine. We would have wine at like Thanksgiving,
Christmas dinner. They might bring something like that out if they had non-Italians, to
offer ‘em a drink. But, very seldom. It might always be around, but it wasn’t necessarily
drunk. Yes, my dad drank. But I did not, very often see him drunk. Um, he drank
towards the end maybe a fifth of whiskey every couple of days. He said it helped. He
always had problems with his throat. And he said it helped. But I can’t say that I ever
saw him falling down drunk. That I would consider out of control.

The only responsibility my father had around the house was he would stoke the
furnace. If there was anything to be fixed or mended or, like I said, he’s very good with
electrical work. He would do that. It was his responsibility to see that there was always
coal. He would come up and tell my mother that we need more coal. Order the coal.
And make sure that when it came that, he would make sure it was working - the furnace
was working properly. That kind of thing. He had a, a big toolbox, chest. I mean huge.
It would fit, ‘bout the size of a coffin. He had a workroom.
Papa seldom talked about what, he never told me about his life in Italy. I never got much out of him, 'cause I used to ask him. 'Cause I was never happy that we lived in Iowa. I don’t know why, but I never was. And I always used to ask him, “Why?” “Why did you come here? You could have gone anywhere.” All he would ever say was, he followed the railroad. And I have to assume because there were other Italians here from his neck of the woods that he stayed. He never really said too much to me about it. However, we were very close. And I could get anything. I couldn’t get it from my mother. I couldn’t get it from Mary Terese. I just had to go ask my dad. He would have given me anything.

Michael was mother’s favorite. Because he was the oldest, and she leaned on him. She depended upon him. She, she relied on him for things. But, I was Dad’s favorite, I think because, by the time I came along, he was older, and he had more time, and I got the benefit of all that.

Cristine

Mom was short, heavy set, dark hair...that is all I remember. An old chubby lady. She worked at a grocery store. I remember being about maybe two, three and four and she would take me down to the market with her. The big fruit market down there. Oh, I loved it. It was a big warehouse, a huge place. To me, it was a huge place. I’ve always loved buildings and architecture. Even though it was a big old warehouse, it was a huge building and I could go into the big freezer and I would get to go into the office and get peanuts out of the peanut machine. You buy wholesale. Oh, I think it was the wholesale. A wholesale fruit market. So she would go get stuff for the store there.

I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what her routine was. I imagine she went to work. I imagine I tagged along with her to work but I have no idea. I do remember that they put me in preschool. St. Joseph’s Academy had a preschool attached to it. So, when I was four or five, I went to kindergarten and I hated it. I was very shy because there weren’t a lot of kids around, when I was growing up, except my nieces and nephews, I
supposed - a couple of them Teresa, Kathleen and Cecelia. I don't know how often I saw them.

I don’t think I liked preschool. I got sick all the time so I think that they pulled me out. I don’t know how much of this was memory or how much of this I was told. I had my tonsils out. So being in preschool was part of it. I don’t remember having any other babysitters, so I have no idea. I was just hanging around the house and in the store. Since the store was attached to the house, there would be no good reason why they would both have to be gone all day. As far as school goes, she was sick by the time I started school.

I have memories of Dad as he was sitting on the front stoop and saying “hi” to the people as they went by. Sitting in the chair in the living room and looking out the window and drinking coffee and giving me a sip of coffee because he put lots of sugar in it and I liked that. I think I have a memory of him in the store taking care of meat and that is about it. Dad worked in the store, too. As far as I know. I was born in his late fifties and when mother got sick, he must have been sixty-eight. I’m not sure what happened with his retirement.

As far as their relationship goes, I only have stories that other people tell me. I think they were very typical Italian which was very independent of each other in some ways. There were roles you played rather than relationships and, you know. Especially my mother was very independent especially in the beginning.

I suppose my parents used Italian for anything that they didn’t want me to hear. Which was fairly convenient, I would think. At least that was smarter than the way parents are now and they say whatever they want in front of the kids as if the kids don’t have any ears and then they regret it later.

Dad was more like a grandfather. In fact, I remember one time being with him and somebody, like taking a walk with him, and somebody calling me his granddaughter and him saying, “No, this was my daughter.” We lived on a long street and we would just walk up and down. He would go and I would go with him. I have a few memories
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of conversations. After my mother died, he was crying one time. I think he might have been drinking at the time. I don’t think he drank a great amount, but I think he must have been out playing cards. He told me he missed Mom and then he took me in the back bedroom and showed me a big roll of money that he had stashed away. He said that when he died for me to come and get it. That he was keeping it from everyone else but that I could have it. (laughter)

I think that Dad was a lot like my brother Michael is now. He says a few things but you don’t have conversations. Well, I guess with my brother, you actually have more conversations. It is not that he didn’t talk, I wouldn’t have a memory of that because I was only fourteen when he died. We didn’t live together. He was sick. Quite a few years he was in a nursing home. I don’t have much memories of him. I was involved with the rest of my life, school.

I remember my Dad was kind of a cynic, a bit of a cynic and a loner. But not an angry person. Like a lot of Italians, cynical about life. The conversations I remember most were about what I considered his biggest mistake is that he didn’t practice Catholicism and he didn’t go to church. I was greatly upset about it. I remember talking to him about it and him being resentful about the Church. Because the Church had some money and in Italy, the people were so poor. So, I was kind of delighted when he got sick. I’m trying to figure the year he died. In 1960. He died the same year Pious XII died. I remember that very well because I thought Pious XII would be Pope for ever. I was going to a Catholic school and I got a very Catholic education which I actually enjoyed very very much. Anyway, that was the year he died. About a year or two before that, he went back to Church. He was very sick. I remember that he and I would walk to Mass together. I don’t know if it was because he was going to die. I think probably. I don’t know if I prevailed upon him or what? I just remember feeling kind of relieved.

I don’t necessarily think of my mother as fondly, or don’t think of her fondly. I think she was just kind of a stranger to me. I remember a couple of things that were hard for me at the time. I think one was when she was sick and she fell and I wanted to help
her up which I certainly would not have been incapable of doing. And, uh, she wouldn’t let me. She wanted me to go get one of my brothers and I remembered not liking the idea. I remember another time, she was sitting in a wheelchair and I was trying to get her attention and she was reading and she didn’t want to pay attention.

I do remember I used to sleep with her in the big bed and my father slept in the back bedroom. They slept apart and I don’t know if she was sick at this time or not. I used to sleep on her arm as a pillow. I remember her teaching me a prayer when I was afraid. I used to have nightmares. “My mother, my confidence, my mother, my confidence...” Which I thought, later when I grew up that that was a prayer to Mary. And then I found out that in Italy there really is a Lady of Confidence. I found a little holy card and I kept it because I thought, “Golly, my mother did teach me something that was real.” But I had never heard of that particular devotion anywhere else. But, I remember the bedroom. It was a beautiful house. It had windows that started a little bit up from the floor and went clear to the ceiling. And big ones. It had a big bay in the dinning room. I could draw the house. It was just beautiful.

One of the things that I remember that touched me about her that made me proud of her was that there was a little boy that had gotten lost. Boy or a girl. All I know is that the child was black and my mother brought him into the house and tried to take care of him and find out where he lived and get him home somehow. And she did. I remember that moment just being really proud because I knew, I had a vague awareness that there was prejudice against black people and my mother didn’t care about it. That would be the kind of thing that I mean. That today, she would be against the current of what you would normally do. What else do I remember? I’m trying to think. I certainly don’t have a lot of memories. We used to have this black man who painted the kitchen. His name was Henry Kitchen, actually, he painted the house. I remember her being very kind to him.

I don’t think I have many memories of her. At times, I look at myself and my sisters and I think, I bet you, that is what my mother was like. Tough. Not very, uh,
soft, except with children, just very strong, tough and independent. Almost like a latent women's libber. (laughter) Had she been born fifty years later...very independent. Uh, not much of a flirt, not much of that kind of thing with men. Very independent. That is my recollection of her.

I remember her smoking one time. She took me to visit relatives with her and she and a couple of other lady friends of hers so she would have been in her late forties at this time. They decided to try a cigarette and I just remember them trying to smoke and laughing hysterically because they didn’t know what they were doing and they thought they were being so clever by doing this kind of socially unacceptable thing.

Did my mother have a favorite child? Probably...well, it would have been Michael or Frank...just her boys. I think mothers and daughters always have trouble getting along. Or mothers and older daughters. I think she preferred boys. I don’t think my dad had a favorite, except maybe the girls. Joanne and I. Mary got left out, sort of.

I do remember one of the things my mother told me when I was growing up, that I must be special because I was born so late in her life and I was fairly unexpected. The last child was Joanne and she was twelve years old. So she always said, “God must have something special for you, because you were born out of time.” That leaves you with both a sense of being a nice thing to hear and also a great cross to bear. I don’t think I am very special, so what’s the big deal?

One of the most significant descriptive factors scholars use to describe Italian American households is that they are patriarchal (Bernardi 1990; Bianco 1974; DeMarco 1981; Johnson 1985; Magliocco 1993; Mangione and Morreale 1992; Martinelli and Gordon 1988; Mormino 1986; Mormino and Pozetta 1987; Nelli 1983; Leonardo 1984; Orsi 1990; Rolle 1980; Romanucci-Ross 1975; Tricarico 1984; Yans-McLaughlin 1971). In the case of the Porti family, this is not true for the most part. John Porti did not have authority over this family either externally or internally. Most of the decision making was done by his wife. Many of the decisions concerning the children came from his wife, or
the older siblings. He took a supportive position on the sidelines. Their children think this is due to the fourteen-year difference in their parent's age and that their father was tired and content to let their mother take the lead. I feel that Lena Porti would have had it no other way. So, although Lena was somewhat atypical of Italian American women in general, she seems very typical as far as other Italian women in Des Moines, specifically her sisters and friends from the Cosentino area in Calabria. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, men and women, by necessity, shared a more egalitarian relationship because economically it was the best adaptive strategy in both Belsito and their new home Des Moines. This female independence was the strongest in those women who originated from the Cosentino area. A more typical male/female relationship was described by those whose families came from other areas of Calabria and Italy.

\[\text{My Uncle Michael's wife Lucille's parents exemplify the patriarchal model. It is interesting to note, that they originated from Terravecchia, a village on the west coast of Calabria opposite from Belsito. Lucille was raised on the Southside, like many others from the Terravecchia area. Her mother stayed at home while her father maintained all outside contacts. He was a laborer and he was the dominate force in the family. As a result, Lucille's mother never learned English that well.}\]
FOUR

THE FAMILY

"Us kids we got along as good as other kids..."

In a traditional Calabrian family, hierarchy was fixed. Children took a subordinate role not only to their parents, but to any adult, relative or otherwise. Obedience was valued over all else leaving little room for affection. The individuality of the siblings was much less important than the overall security and health of the family (Arlacchi 1985; Barzini 1967; Covello 1967). The average family-size among the second generation Italian Americans in Des Moines was 5.45 children. The "Italian community" existed in the bonds between siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles. Most of the second-generation Italian Americans interviewed, emphasized that the important social networks in their lives were familial, perhaps extending to parental friends who originated from the same village in Italy.

Michael

Well, we were seventeen months apart the first three: me, Francis, Mary Terese. Johnny was next, and then Joanne. No, Joey next. And then Joanne and then Cristine. In increasing intervals.

I was born in 1920, so Francis was born in 1922. We got along good. Except

31The Porti family spoke in some length about their extended family in Des Moines. It is clear from the interviews that their mother’s family compiled the majority of their social relationships. Even today, those cousins still living in Des Moines still communicate with each other quite often throughout the year. I did not include this portion of the interviews here because of space and to maintain the anonymity of the Porti cousins.
When we were kids and I was in charge. We were supposed to do chores. When we got home he would begin fussing, “I don’t have to do that!” and I say, “Yes, you do.” “No, I don’t.” But other than that, we get along all right. I was more a foreigner in this country than he was. He seemed like he adapted more. Like the time I went to Iowa State. I was lost, came home and didn’t go to school. But Francis pursued it and became a dentist.

Francis is more outgoing than I am. Much more. I’m a very private person. I never had no real friends in my high school. He was the ace in sports and he was good. Really good. And all I had was my grades. Ain’t no team sport in that. (chuckle)

When we were kids, you used to have these model airplane kits you could buy for a quarter. It was basically a print on balsa wood, which you cut out with razor blades and then glued together. And Francis used to make the most meticulous planes. I could make ‘em good, too. But not like him. He just had an artistic bit that I just don’t. I guess that’s why he became such a good dentist. Today, I talk to him on a year-round basis, once-a-month. Oh, I’d say more than half the calls are from him. We see each other once every other month. Well, he’s a dentist, so I see him at least once a year. (chuckle)

Mary Terese is seventeen months back from Francis, so she’s three years younger. Seems the 12th of July is her birthday. Mary Terese wasn’t like my mother. Well, she’d probably be more like my father. Well, my father was outgoing. He’d kid and joke with people when they came in the store. He generally enjoyed people. Mary Terese had lots of friends in school. Growing up, we got along all right, I guess. Except for the episodes, like I told you, when I was the tyrant of the house. But now we get along. She got along much better with Francis because she was the young girl in high school and her brother was All-City, All-American, I mean All-State football player. She kept scrapbooks, you know. Hell, I didn’t get no scrapbook.

She was the only girl in the family for a long time and we gave her a hard time. We were going to school one day and me and Francis had some money. We used to stop at this drugstore where you bought candy bars. If you had a certain wrapper, it was like
hitting the jackpot. Or playing lotto or something. You’d get an extra candy bar, you can even get three or four candy bars. One day, we got real lucky. And we got four or five candy bars. Me and Francis did. As we were going out of the drugstore, this cute little sister of ours walked by. I was probably in 5th or 3rd grade; she’s probably 1st grade. Cute little devil. She wanted a piece of candy. And we said, “Get out of here.”

(laughter) She didn’t get none of our candy. And some guy in the drugstore saw what was happening and said, “Come here honey, I’ll buy you a candy bar.” He bought her a candy bar, and she got it unwrapped, and she got three or four more. Well, anyway, she wound up with like twenty candy bars. And then we suckered her out of most of those.

(laughter) Well, we were older. And we kind of bullied her. She was just bewildered by two older brothers.

My relationship with her is better than ever. I’d say good. Oh, I talk to her, once a week if I happen to answer the phone. She’s actually calling to talk to Lucille. If I answer the phone, we’ll pass the time of day. SHE called today and I answered the phone because Lucille wasn’t here. She talked to me. Mary Terese brought Lu and I together. I didn’t meet Lu until I was out of school and Mary Terese knew her for years.

The most I remember about Johnny was, he was sickly. My mother used to send him to a convalescent home. I don’t know how she got him in that much, but she got him in. One of our customers was a lady that ran the Junior League Convalescent Home. It still operates.

My brother was sickly. I don’t know what was wrong with him. Man, my mother worried about him. And she was doing business with this lady, and this lady liked my mother. This lady agreed to take him. How she got him into the convalescent system - I don’t know. So that used to be right across the street from the Methodist hospital, just a block up from our house on Pleasant Street. I used to go down there, and play with Johnny and the other kids. It was a short period of time he lived there. Might have been
a year. I don’t know. Someplace around six, seven years old, he was\(^{32}\).

Most of my memories of John concern fishing. One time we were fishing up in Minnesota and hadn’t done too well. We were on the way back to the camp. We had to take a channel between the two lakes by boat. I was running the motor and towing Johnny and whoever else was, I think Joe, I think. And Lucille went with me. And I was going down this little channel kind of slow because of the narrow quarters moving toward the next lake. Johnny, never to waste a moment, put his lure in the water, and hooked a big fish. He got all excited and was yelling at me to stop. Well, how in the hell was I going to stop the boat? I just can’t right away. I pulled the throttle back. I figured the best thing I could do to get him stopped, was throw the anchor from the back of my boat into the water. That at least stopped him, and he could fight his fish. Well, he lost it. And he got a big “moose”\(^{33}\) on him. You know what that is? And, I don’t think he ever forgave me. Blamed it all on me.

John and I were probably very similar, although he did have bosom buddies in high school. Which I never did. I think we were pretty much similar mentality, uh, personalities. Kind of reserved. Loner. He didn’t have a lot of friends. John was not easy to get along with. He was in the air. I guess when you think about it I wasn’t too easy to get along with either. He was awful self-centered, I always thought. But then people could say the same thing about me. John was a lot like my father. My relationship with John today is estranged. Talk to him zero. It has been since my dad

\(^{32}\)When I asked John about his time at the home, he told me that he did not remember it personally. He did remember his older brothers and sister telling him of it and he always thought it was one of those stories they told a younger sibling to tease them. The fact that John was in a home as a child has become mythological in its retelling. The years spent in the home have increased in the telling. Many of his siblings wonder if his time spent there alienated him and caused him to leave home after his parent’s death, never to return.

\(^{33}\)This term has its origin in the Calabrese expression \textit{muso morte} which means face like the dead. Today, my family has anglicized it and shortened it and merely say “moose,” most members of the second and third generation would understand your meaning.
died, over thirty years.

And the same thing happened to Joey, and Joey left the house. He wasn’t sickly, but my mother was busy and getting busier at the store. This lady, just didn’t have any children. I think she just talked my mother into first just taking him in the morning, keeping him all day and Mom would pick him up at night. Sometimes something happened and he’d stayed over night. Pretty soon, she wanted to take him over. 5th, 6th, 7th grade. Finally, we’d get so mad because he didn’t want to come home at all. So, my mother finally put a stop to this. And brought him home.

Joey would be more similar to my mother than anybody else in the family, I would say. Just outgoing, take-charge. Belonged to some church, pretty soon he’d be head of the committee. I was out of the house when he got home from Maude’s. We used to kind of tease him a lot. We didn’t really know him real well because it was five or six years he was involved with that woman. That’s a long time. We thought it was strange, or at least I did. I’d say, “Joey don’t want to come home, Ma. How come he don’t want to come home?” He was king of the hill up on 18th Street. And back on 14th Street, he was a little man. Mom put a stop to that after I imagine three or four years. He needed to come home. She stopped it ‘cause he wouldn’t want to come home. You know. Just drove up to and said, “Get in.” (laughter) That’s all. Although she just didn’t think it was normal, I don’t think she was particularly bothered by it. Well, she put up with it for five years ‘cause it was a load off her back.

Once when I came home on leave from the service, Maude was dying of cancer. She insisted that I carry her from her house to the car when they took her to the hospital. She died shortly thereafter. I don’t know why she wanted me. Maybe ‘cause I probably had more to do with her than any others. I was the one who brought her the canning stuff. She liked me. But, she was a little defensive about Joey.

I talk to Joey four or five times a year. He calls me more often than I call him. Our relationship has improved. We weren’t really kids together; we were really two different generations. I see him three or four times a year.
I remember Joanne as a baby. And I can remember her, when I used to go home during the service, her being around the house. I was gone probably most of the three most important years in her life. She's much more stubborn than I am. (chuckle) And I'm bad as far as stubborn goes. (chuckle) One time, I was trying to get Joanne to do something. And she didn't want to do it. So I grabbed her, twisted her arm behind her back, and said, "You're gonna' do it." "I'm not gonna' do it." "You are gonna do it," and I ratcheted it up a few more notches. She said, "Go ahead and break it. I don't care." (laughter) And she meant it. I lost the argument. I didn't break her arm. I suppose I was, high school age, and she was six, seven or eight years old. I didn’t lose many arguments. No, I was the oldest. Mostly, except when Mom was home, my word was law. At least I thought it was. Well, there is no doubt. Joanne is the most stubborn woman I ever saw.\(^3\)

She must be like my father's personality, 'cause she's not like my mother. (chuckle) I talk to Joanne on the phone a couple times a year. And see her about the same. Our relationship has deteriorated a little bit. I'm sorry to say. All her fault, not mine. Last few years, it has improved. But before that she didn't have too much to do with me. There was a time when she got sick and was in the hospital. I went to see her. And she looked like she didn't want to see me. I don't know what I did. I think she's gotten over it.

Cristine was born in '45 or '46. No, she would have been born in '45. Well, I was gone, too. For the first year of her life. My mother was starting to feel poorly by that time, so it was good that Mary Terese was still home. Well, Cristine is just like one of my kids. I don't know much about them, either. 'Cause they were young, I was

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\(^3\)The Porti family value "stubbornness." While I was a child, I remember going through a similar scene with my mother, Joanne. She could twist my arm to a breaking point and I would not cry or ask her to stop. My mother took some pride in my stubbornness, which she said was greater than her own. I, on the other hand, would agree with my uncle's assessment that Joanne is certainly "the most stubborn woman I ever saw."
working. She came to live with us when she was eight. She is more like a daughter. We get along good. Always been good. If Cristine calls and I answer the phone, we’ll chat for a few minutes and then she’ll ask if Lucille is there. Lucille answers the phone, I won’t talk to her at all. She calls once every two weeks. We see her twice a year.

Francis

I do not share the same passion for hunting and fishing like Michael. He went because he loved it; I went because he wanted me to go. But I could take it or leave it. Oh, God, did he have rigid rules for hunting. (chuckle) “You couldn’t carry a gun without pointing it at the ground. You never could carry a gun without the safety on. You never walked in front of anybody, it was all year-round safety.” What else... “You never pointed a gun at anything without looking beyond where you were pointing.” Yeah. I followed the rules. I was afraid he’d shoot me.

You know what I remember most though, he was so crafty. He don’t know anything about rabbit-hunting. But he’d go rabbit-hunting. Michael would always hunt with a .22 rifle. A .22 rifle as opposed to a shotgun. It was a single pellet; whereas, a shotgun shot out several. It would shoot a pattern. Well, he was really a good shot. And so he wouldn’t think of using a shotgun to shoot a rabbit. For two reasons: one, it was too easy to hit it; and two, it had all this buckshot in it if you shot it with a shotgun. So his only way to hunt was to take a .22 rifle and shoot the rabbit in the head. Whenever we’d go hunting, I had to climb the damn tree. When you climb a tree, you get a perspective of where the rabbits are than when you’re on the same level. You can’t see through the bushes. So I would have to climb into the tree, and spot for rabbits. “Michael, it’s over there; Michael, it’s over there.” And then he’d shoot at it. (laughter) He was kind of a bossy kid. Isn’t that funny, that we’re such close friends? In spite of all that.

Michael was stern. Unflinching. Stubborn. A very, very quick mind. Has a way of tearing a problem down so that just the bare necessities of the facts come out of it. He
could squeeze everything, all the frilly stuff away, and just look at it the way it really is. And that used to frustrate me. 'Cause I was more of a romantic type. All I'd like for him, maybe I'd like him to be, he never felt like it was what he needed or wanted. He just is and that is the way it is. He's still like that. He is a good one to talk to if you have a problem...if you want to have someone throw water on what you'd like to do. I mean, you'd say, "Michael, what do you think of this?" By the time, he got through, you weren't going to do it. He's more analytical than me. I am more a romantic. Maybe I'm not perceived that way. But that's how I felt about it.

Anytime Michael wanted anything, he would call me and I would never question what he wanted. I said, "I'll be over." I remember vividly working at the office, Michael called and he said, "We're supposed to have frost tonight. We need to have the tomatoes covered." I said, "Ok. I have to work. And then, I'll come over and help you cover the tomatoes." But I'll never question him when he'd want something. The reason I didn't was because I knew if I needed something, which was occasionally, I would call him, he'd be right there. And we're still like that.

Mary Terese, when she was younger, if I said something, you'd think I was dropping pearls. Just about everything I said and did was just really nice. Especially when I started to get involved with sports in high school. And, of course, I'd attracted all these guys to the house. But she really used to play up to me. All her ambition when I went into dental practice was to work for me. Which she did. And then we fought like hell. (laughter) How would I describe Mary Terese? She's a lot like your mother really. She was not what I call an extrovert. She wasn't introverted, either.

She's very blunt. Well, your mom is, too. They're just alike, really. I can remember guy after guy after guy coming to our house wanting to marry Mary Terese. At home, Mary Terese didn't have any responsibilities. Really, she didn't. Well, my parents didn't need to be restrictive. They didn't have to be. Mary Terese was, she didn't run around or anything like that. The worst thing she and her best friend ever did was go for a bike ride. (laughter) The family was pretty restrictive, but by the same token, I don't
even think it was even necessary. Because none of us ventured out. When I went on my
first date, I think they thought it was all set. My relationship with Mary Terese is perfect
still. She still thinks I’m great. I don’t care what I would say, Mary Terese would say
that’s fine.

Well, personally, I didn’t know John. When I was growing up, John was always
in the hospital, the TB ward. Yeah, it was tuberculosis. And in those days, they isolated
you. So he lived at this place called a children’s home. It was right up the street from
our house. I can remember going over there to see him to visit, you know. It was only a
matter of walking down the street. John was always of sitting on the steps going upstairs
to the 2nd floor of this house. Standing out there, not saying a word. Almost like he
didn’t even know who we were.

The year I graduated from high school, he was in 8th grade. But John was a
pretty good athlete. He was captain of the basketball team at Dowling. And well-liked.
He was president of his class. He didn’t do much around the house and he didn’t work in
the store. Did you know John was state algebra champion? Michael was state geometry
champion. They competed at Iowa State. I don’t know if they still do that. I didn’t win
any kind of scholastic thing at all. So I suppose they thought I was stupid.

Well, my contact with John was because we both went to college. When we lived
in Missouri, John used to come down. He was like Michael. He loved to hunt and he
loved to fish. He used to come down to Missouri and fish all the time. And he’d stay
with us. That was really how I come to know John. I was thirty years old at the time, so
he must have been about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. This was before he was
married. He probably told you how he got married, and they lived in England.

My relationship with Joe is just like Michael. I could call Joe, and Joe would be
right there. Same way. Same way with John, you know. Call John long distance. As a
matter of fact, I did. He said, “I’ll come right out and help you.” And he went. And this
is when I was supposed to have this fatal disease. I was supposed to be dead by the time
I was thirty-six or thirty-seven. But, today, I probably wouldn’t call him. Maybe I
wouldn't call him because I wouldn't think he'd come.

And I tell you about Joe. Joe was a real extrovert. Joe had all kinds of friends. Joe was always going somewhere, doing something. He used to drive my folks crazy. I think that's one of the reasons my mother had him go live with someone else. Joe never did come home to live. Not while I was around, 'cause I went away to school. But I don't have any recollection of him living with us at all. My mother was an extrovert, just like him. I think your mom is more introverted than Mary.

Joan, your mom is a bomb. B-o-m-b. Your mom is smart, smart. See Mary Terese was not real smart, you know. You always know how your mom feels about you. I mean she doesn't try to double-talk you. She doesn't try to sweet-talk you. Whatever she says, she's thought about it. She doesn't shoot her mouth off. I get along with her great. Gosh, when I was in college, she was nine years old.

Well, you have to remember that Cristine and my daughter Kathleen are the same age. So they were in high school together. And my mother was really embarrassed when Cristine was born or before when she became pregnant. Because she was pregnant at the same time as Genevieve, and she thought it was terrible. She felt like she was taking attention from her first grandchild. She was taking some of the glow off of the event. So Kathleen and Cristine when they were small, they used to play a lot together. And, of course, they went to school together. And they were always friends in school. It was more of a cousin relationship than it was an aunt. So I look on her more like a niece or a daughter almost, than a sister. Again, Cristine is somebody who's really smart. I'm sure she is an introvert. Positive she is. Cristine's really...she's in control of her life. I'll tell you that.

**Mary Terese**

Us kids we got along as good as other kids. We didn't have any parental supervision so I would say we argued a lot. I think parents should be home when they are raising kids. My dad was just sort of easy come, easy go, whatever my mother
wanted, was it. We never asked my Dad, "Can I do this or that." He’d think I was nuts, just ask my mother.

Michael was mean. He was just mean, ornery. He wanted to be the boss and was very strict about most things. Whether we listened, depended on who else was around. If there would be someone else there to protect us. See right here...this scar? We were washing dishes and we got into an argument on who was going to wash the last dish. And he said, “You are,” and I said, “No, I’m not you are.” Oh, I was stubborn. Oh, I must have been twelve or thirteen. He had a knife in his hand. And he wanted me to pick up the last dish and I said “No, I won’t pick it up.” He went to reach for my arm and he cut me. I always remember him locking Francis and me in the house on Saturdays and making us clean. We were all in trouble when Mom found out. If one of us was in trouble then all of us were in trouble. We’d all run and hide. I used to call the store and I’d be crying. I’d say, “Michael hit me” or “Michael did this” or “Michael did that.” She said, “Wait until I get home.” She’d come home with this stick off of the apple crate or orange crate. They were pretty thick. Boy, she’d come thundering in.

Today, I talk to Michael at least several times a week, if he answers the phone. If Aunt Lu isn’t home (laughter). One day I called and he said, “How come you always ask for Lucille?” I said, “Because I want to talk to her.” He said, “So, talk to me.” I said, “What do we have to talk about.” So we talked. But as a rule, it is hard to carry on a conversation with him. I have a good relationship with him these days. He has mellowed out. When I had my stroke, he used to come and visit me in the hospital all the time, more than my favorite brother did.

Francis. He isn’t really my favorite brother anymore. But when we were younger, he always stuck up for me and looked out for me. I always thought of him as a protective person. Him and Michael would get into a fight when Michael would want to hit me. He would get mad at him. I mean it is hard to put it into words. I always used to look up to him. When he was going with Genevieve, for instance. He was seventeen or eighteen, in high school and I was sixteen or seventeen. My mother would always
want him to take me with him and Genevieve when they went to a movie. I was the one to say, "I’m not going to go with them." I think he would have taken me. I just always looked up to him.

When he got older he wasn’t around the house much. Not after he was old enough to get into sports. The only thing he did at the stores was make all the signs on the windows. We used to write signs on the window. "Strawberries three for a dollar, bananas a pound three for a quarter," so forth and so on. He did a lot of stocking when he wasn’t out playing baseball or football or whatever. But he never worked in the store very much.

Francis is a nice, congenial, easy person to get a long with. I don’t hear from him very often. Maybe four or five times a year. If I have a dental appointment, I see him then. And once-in-a-while, he will call me about something or another or I’ll call him and ask him about something. Our relationship is okay.

I don’t remember John. I remember when he was sick. Later on, the only thing I remember about him was that he used to read continuously. He would make a stack of peanutbutter sandwiches and he would sit on the chair or sometimes he would sit on the floor and put his feet on the chair and he was oblivious to everything going on around him. He just read. He was a very quiet person. I haven’t seen him for thirty years. I haven’t heard from him in thirty years until last year, I wrote him a letter and he wrote one back.

We used to tease the heck out of Joey. We used to make life miserable for him. The few times that he would come home we used to torture him. He always got under the bed and hid from us. We just teased him to death. We used to call him Maude’s baby doll. I don’t remember at what point he finally came home to live but he was a very hard person to live with. I mean he always had all the attention from Maude. He was king of the hill, so it was hard for him to accept the way we lived. The way we were.

I put Joe like Joanne. They would tell you what they thought. Sometimes they
would tell you before they even thought about what they were saying. Joey is an outgoing person. He was spoiled. Maude spoiled him. He was a beautiful butcher, too. He was ornery all the time. He used to tell my mother, “You have to take care of me until I am eighteen years old. That you don’t have any choice.” Well, then he moved to Lincoln. He was an x-ray technician at Methodist and I don’t know why or how he moved to Lincoln. He calls on my birthday and he comes to Michael and Lucille’s maybe a couple of times a year. I like him better now.

Oh, I always got along with Joanne better than Joe. I can remember that she always wanted to go everywhere with me. She always used to make me take her places with me. Since I’ve had this stroke, I get vague about a lot of stuff. I always got along with your mother because she was twelve years younger than I was. I used to take her to movies and so forth. She used to go to the movie four or five times a week. She could do anything she wanted to do and my father always stuck up for her.

She wasn’t real outgoing like Joey was. She was a nice, easy going person. She was my Dad’s favorite. I think because she was so much younger than the rest of us. Maybe it was because she was named after him. But she was always his favorite. I hear from her several times a year. I hope our relationship is good. We had a good time yesterday. I saw her at Christmas. Oh, I would say she is like my mother. Joan was never bashful or shy or anything.

Sam and I were married when Cristine was about five years old. I had always raised her because my mother had always pushed her to the side. I was twenty-two when she was born. My mother was mean to her. I did feel like her mother. She was about six years old when my mother got sick, and so she used to hang around with me a lot. We lived across the street in the apartments. She used to come over and stay a lot.

Cristine was very quiet when she was little. In the first place, mother was always apologizing to people that she had gotten pregnant. You see Cristine was born two months before Kathleen, Francis’ first. That was the first grandchild. She thought that it was terrible that she had Cristine because she thought it took away from Kathleen. She
was hateful with Cristine. And then after she died, Cristine was, I think, eight years old. Dad moved her over to Michael’s and I don’t think she was ever very happy. I blame Michael for it, too. I think Michael and my Dad were both equally wrong for taking her from me. I think that affected her. It affects your life. The things that happen to you like that affects your life.

Cristine doesn’t like anyone arguing and you have to watch your language. You see Cristine wouldn’t fit into our group of cousins who get together on New Year’s Day or anything because she wouldn’t like the type of conversation. She doesn’t like cussing or gossiping. But she never forced her religion or her beliefs on anyone. She isn’t like that, but she has very definite ideas about how kids should behave when they are younger.

Our relationship is always good. Either she calls me or I call her at least once a month. I don’t usually see her, not more than three or four times a year. We used to see her at Thanksgiving and Christmas but this year she was only home once. We usually keep in close contact even if we don’t see her.

John

I was more ambitious than Michael was. Otherwise, he and I had a lot in common. We always did have a lot in common. Loved to read. Loved to fish, be outdoors. Enjoyed things together. But I was much more adventuresome than he and I think I was more ambitious. He had more responsibilities. I always thought he was very, very bright. In fact, I thought he was probably the brightest one in the family.

His quiet nature was more like my dad, I guess. I always thought he got his brains from my mother. Michael just never seemed to do anything with his brains or his skills. But he was tremendous. At least it was always my impression that he was a better athlete than Frank but he ever really got involved in any of it. I remember I’d get into scrapes with him or he’d want me to do something and I’d refuse to do it. Then my mother got in there and she’d see my way, which would infuriate him. I think he’d get very angry at that. He thought I got away with a lot, which I did. I couldn’t challenge him physically
because he was so much older and bigger than I was. There is a six years age difference. Six years, at that age, is a lot.

Just to illustrate how rigid Michael was. He had certain rules when we went hunting. We could only take .22 rifles because it wasn’t sporting to shoot the rabbit with a shotgun. And also you had to hit the rabbit in the head. This presumably was because you wouldn’t spoil part of the meat or anything. Which is kind of a good reason, but I mean we’re out there for the fun of it so I had a little trouble when he informed me of his rigid rules. He was pretty successful at it because he was a lot bigger than I was and I always depended on him to take me. He insisted that’s the way it was done.

He used to take me a lot of places. We went fishing a lot. I can remember even as a little kid when I was not very old, and we lived on the west side of town, I can remember riding down to the river with him. He was on his bicycle and I’d sit on the handle bars and have a couple of these long cane poles. We fished under what we called the fish bridge. There was an OLD Italian man that used to be down there just about every day at least four or five days a week. And he came from clear over on the Southside in the Italian district. He didn’t speak English very well. Down there fishing every day. Name was Frank. And we learned a lot, Michael and I did, from Frank just sitting down there along the river fishing. About fishing. It was a good relationship. We were fishing mostly for carp, and catfish or anything we were happy to get. We just enjoyed the pursuit of it more than anything. It could be exciting at times.

I got along well with Francis. But he and I didn’t have as much in common. I sort of admired him for what he had accomplished. He was this tremendous athlete. Very looked up to. Successful in every way in the ordinary sense of the word. And I got a lot of good advice from him because he was going through all these things three or four years ahead of me and I realized it. He could tell me just what was going on. I’d ask him what I should do in college, what I should take, that sort of thing. I didn’t feel he was as smart as I was. If I really had as many talents as he did, and my brains, I guess I always felt that would be something. He was a very nice person. I really felt closest to
him. Because Michael challenged me, wouldn’t put up with my stuff; Frank was much more easy going. Would accept more from me, where Michael wouldn’t. Michael was rigid; Frank was very social. I was more social than Michael was. I think I was probably a little between both of them. I was much more spoiled than either one of them.

Well, I always contacted Frank quite a bit. He got married very young and had a home and I was always welcome. And on several occasions, in college when I had a few days, I’d go stay with Frank and Gen. I wouldn’t go home. More going on, more interesting. In the Service, he was stationed down in Missouri at the Lake of the Ozarks. I went down and stayed a week or two, hung out and went fishing. Same way in Omaha, you see. I’d go to Omaha and here was the big brother who was in college, playing college football. I really looked up to him.

I remember Frank was sort of my hero. Because of his athletic ability. It’s a lot of fun to read about your older brother when he’s in the newspapers and that. Everyone said, “Oh, you’re Frank Porti’s brother.” Most of my memories of him are in that connection. He was the big star, you see.

Since I’ve been out here, I think he visited us once down in Medford and once we met them in San Francisco. Then that’s the extent of it outside of an occasional phone call. But there’d be years between phone calls. I don’t think I’ve talked to him on the phone for several years.

I think I got a lot of nurturing from Mary Terese. She sorta was responsible for the house. She was always very nice to me, would go out of her way to do things for me. In fact, she didn’t get a fair deal and that is more retrospectively, than at the time. I got the idea, she was a little bit cheated. With good reason. The two that were closest in age to her, Frank and I, were both very successful. My mother used to favor both of us. You could tell Mary Terese felt she was treated badly. She was allowed a fair amount of freedom but not nearly as much as we were. There were a lot of things girls couldn’t do in those days, but boys -- we could do anything. Mary Terese was never especially...she never had any boyfriends. She wasn’t very attractive to begin with. So the problem of
her dating didn’t arise, I don’t think.

My memories of Mary Terese are mostly around the house. I could take my problems to her and she’d have an answer. Almost like a mother figure. Never critical of me. She was actually the one who played the mother role because my mother wasn’t there to deal with us. And I remember when I was very small, we fixed a boxing ring in the back yard. And I always considered myself a tough little kid at that time. I’d get in the ring with anybody. And I was always proud of Mary Terese. She was the only kid in the group there that I couldn’t whip. Girls are bigger than boys at that age.

Now Joe was the one closest to me. He and I never got along. I think he resented me with good reason. I was pretty overbearing. I was only a year older than he was, and was well ahead of him. He was shorter and a little fat even when he was a kid, you see. He didn’t do well in school. He did all right, but not like I did. So I sort of thought he was this dumb kid. He was always good natured, but he and I would come to blows occasionally. I just sort of treated him not quite as good as I was.

For several years, he lived with a lady who used to trade at the grocery store. When my mother got really busy at the store, and too many children at home, this lady started taking care of Joe. It got to the point where I said he lived with her for long periods of time. And she very much favored him, I understand. She didn’t like me because I was sorta always picking on him. When he came home, he and I lived together in the same room. But we didn’t get along very well. Joe was very social. Very outgoing. But not near as bright as me. I think Joe got along with Mom all right. He related to this other woman quite strongly at least for a long time. I always thought of him partly as an outsider because he hadn’t lived at home when he was younger. He had to try a lot harder for anything he got. Physically, mentally, everything.

I don’t remember Joanne. Really, she’s several years younger than I am.

I remember Cristine, sure. More so than Joanne. Because she was so young and so unexpected. I can remember this little baby running around out in the yard without any clothes on. It was hot in the summer. There was a sand pile out there that she
played in. It was kind of astounding to see this. A tiny little baby. Because I was pretty old. I was seventeen or eighteen years old. It was unexpected. I was very self-centered. These things didn’t bother me, only in how they would affect me.

Joey

I don’t remember having any problems with my brothers and sisters when I did come home. Michael was the major authority around the house when Mom was gone. Michael was tough. Michael is a very strong-willed, self-disciplined man with a great intellect whose brain is a mathematician’s. He never participated much, but he was a very good athlete. It just didn’t turn him on to go out and play in front of people. When he did play, he was very good at it. Excellent golfer. Excellent fisherman. Excellent hunter, good shot...I like Michael. In personality, he’d be closer to Pop.

I hear from Michael probably half a dozen times a year. We’d call each other up. We go over there at least once a year. And he’s been over here several times. We’ve gone to Canada fishing. Once since I moved. My relationship with Michael is excellent. Michael, like I said, is a very tough individual. When I was a kid, he bowled in a bowling league downtown for one year. I know this ‘cause I was there. He’d get done bowling about eleven o’clock and he’d make me run home, run up that hill from down on 5th and Keo...he’d make me run home. He says, “It’s good for you.” He’d make me run home. Michael was eight years older than me. From the time I started living at home, he was in the Navy. And I was just a freshman, or a sophomore, in high school. I really didn’t have that much to do with him in business except for summer when I’d be home.

I like Michael. He’s tough. He was in the Navy Air Force. That’s when the Navy still had it’s own Air Force. The only thing that I can remember is that in order to get in the Navy Air Force, he had to have an operation on his nose. It had been broken someway and he couldn’t breathe right, and he had to have an operation.

Well, Francis is just a year and a half younger than Michael, so he was about to go to the war, too, when I moved back home. Francis was an excellent athlete. He played
all the sports in high school and was good at all of them. I think he was All-City in football and baseball. I don’t know whether he was in basketball or not, but he was an excellent athlete. He was an artist. He used to do the signs on the window in the store. We used to paint them on with, with chalk whiting. He used to make beautiful signs. And John was also, he was a good artist with his hands.

I was batboy for Francis’ team in the summertime when he played legion ball. The only time I was home, was in the summertime. I don’t remember my parents going to see him play. I’m sure they took pride in all of us, but they weren’t expressing in that way. Francis is more like my mother. I call him up whenever I’m in Des Moines, and we communicate on each other’s birthday. We get along fine. I did go over there once, when I needed a set of teeth. He did it in one day’s time for me.

Mary Terese was the chief housekeeper. Why I don’t know whether she enjoyed it or not... (chuckle)... but it was her job, and she did it. I don’t know that anybody would enjoy it. She did it because she was the oldest daughter and she had to. She was told to do it, so she did it. (chuckle) Mary Terese had to do all the housework. (laughter) She did a lot of the cooking, and she was good at it. And she also had to work in the store like the rest of us did. I don’t supposed she liked it any better than anybody else does, but she did it. ‘Cause we were a family, you know. Mary Terese was different. Nice girl. I would say Mary Terese is like Mom. We thought she was mean, because she used to try to boss us around and to get us to help her do things. Well, it’s just like, you only do what you have to do. Today, I call her on her birthday. And I talk to her whenever I’m in town. I get along with her fine.

John was an excellent student. And he didn’t particularly like to work in the store, so he played athletics in high school to get out of the store. And he was an avid reader. He liked to hunt and fish. Everybody did that but Francis. And when he left home, why when he left, he left. (chuckle) He left and never came back. He was a professional student. He went to school. He was in college when he was thirty-two or thirty-three years old. But a very brilliant mind. Actually they were all more brilliant than me,
unfortunately. And I think I was just lazy. (laughter) John was a lot like my dad.

Between 1960 and 1991, I never heard from him. In 1992, I called him up on his birthday, like I do the rest of my siblings. Or, I've started to do. And then I called him in '93. And that's the only occasions that I've had to talk to him since Pop died in 1960. At Pop's funeral he got to Mass late. And I think we left him off on the way back from the cemetery to get the plane to go back. I don't know if he was hesitant or not to come to the funeral. I think he thought it was just an obligation that he did.

I remember very little about Joanne. 'Cause, like I say, I was only home in the summertime. And in high school, she was still just a little kid as far as I'm concerned. I really don't have much memory of Joanne. I would put Joanne in a class of her own. She doesn't have a personality like either one. 'Cause compared to Joanne, they were so quiet, it's unbelievable. (laughter) I do call her whenever I get to Des Moines, and I call her on her birthday. My relationship with her is fine. I don't have any problems with her. I don't have any problems with any of them.

Cristine was even smaller. I think I was still in the house when she was born. She was born in the year when I was a senior in high school. I went in the service in the following February, so I really wasn't around when she was growing up. When I got out of the service, I was in town for two or three years, I guess. I was working at the hospital. And doing my own thing and, you know. I have no idea how my mother reacted when she got pregnant with Cristine. I'm sure it was a surprise.

Joan

I was probably afraid of Michael. Michael was thirteen years older. And he always seemed older. He was older. I think he used that persona of being mean. He never did anything to me. He never punished me. He was never in charge of me. Mary Terese was. And my mother. I think he liked to present that persona. Michael could be outgoing when he had to be. But I think he's also very quiet. I can be outgoing when I have to be. But I don't like to be. Well, Michael is quiet like my father. But he has a
very good business sense. Very good dealing with the public. A lot better than I was.

The only one thing that I could remember mostly about Michael is about when he got his nose fixed. So he could go into the service during the war. He had to have some kind of an operation. I remember coming home from school, and my mother telling me that Michael had this operation and I should go in and try to comfort him and help him. (laughter) This is not a thrill to me. I went in and here he was laying on the couch and his nose was stuffed with cotton. I mean, he looked terrible. He looked like death warmed over. And his nose was all plugged up and swollen to about three times its size. And I asked, kind of, “Do you want me to do anything?,” hoping he’d say, “No.” ‘Cause I didn’t know what to do. My mother thought this was so wonderful of him to go through this painful operation so he could go into the service. He was being so heroic.

She was very proud of Michael that he did that. He could have easily kept out. Now whether they had any discussion about whether she wanted him to do it or not, I don’t know. But she did think that it was rather heroic of him to do. I think she was probably glad that none of her other children, sons, were old enough to be in the war.

I don’t remember ever talking to him much until my mother got sick. And then, we talked a lot. I think that today we’re much closer. Of course, I’m not afraid of him anymore. We started getting closer when my mother got sick. I found a better appreciation for him. I think after I got married, we got kind of distant, but now we’re getting closer again. We loved to sit and reminisce. I don’t call Michael on the phone, I never do that. I’m not a phone person. I usually call and talk to Lucille, but if Michael’s there, I’ll talk to him. I don’t make phone calls unless I have something I need to discuss or say or ask. I suppose it might average out to once a month.

Francis was always my favorite. I hero-worshipped him. I thought he was just gorgeous. He was a football hero. I was his little sister. You just don’t know what that’s like. To be the little sister of the football star. Oh my god. And there were always gorgeous guys around the house, because my mother was such a good cook. So I can always remember Dowling football players being around. And they were gorgeous. I was
always an obnoxious little kid, and I was always right there. Whenever two or three of
them were gathered together, I was in the midst. I don’t think Francis cared and I think
all the players treated me like their little sister. It was absolutely marvelous. He was in
the newspaper everyday. He not only played football, he played basketball, and he played
baseball. We used to go to the football games. There used to be a lot of games on
Sunday afternoons, and we used to go to most of the basketball games.

I remember once, he took me downtown because I needed shoes. And we had
enough ration points so I could get a new pair of shoes. I swear that everybody as we
walked along the street going to the shoe store, everybody we met knew him. “Hello,
Frank, how are you?” “Great game.” It was just, it was like walking down the street
with a movie star. It was just incredible. I remember going home and saying everybody
in the world must know him, my brother. It was very exciting.

Francis and I aren’t all that close. Although, we’ve had some very nice
conversations when it’s just been he and I. We were never really close. I don’t see him
very often at all. Maybe once a year. We probably get along about the same today. Oh,
he’s a very out-going, gregarious, talkative person. A “BSer.” I would say he’s more
out-going like my mother. And he likes to talk and he likes to get out with people. Has
a lot of friends.

Mary Terese was more or less in control of my destiny. If I wanted to go
somewhere, and I asked my mother, she would say, either, “Ask Mary Terese” or “I’ll
have to ask Mary Terese if you’ve behaved before you can go.” After a while, I just
bypassed mother and went straight to Mary Terese.

Mary Terese was my surrogate mother. She was very affectionate toward me. We
shared a bed for years. She got stuck with me a lot. Sometimes I was a pain in the neck.
I can remember going a lot of places with her. I don’t know if it bothered her. I don’t
think so. It was just kind of a given. She had these friends who had this truck farm, and
we used to go there. Oh, I loved to go out there, because it was this big, old farm house,
and they had a player piano. And they had a lot of fun. They were a large family back
in the 40s, especially during the war. They were a lot of very close-knit families then, very akin to the Waltons. You know, people used to say the Waltons were fakey, but that's the way it was. You were kind of self-contained units and you played with one another and you entertained one another. And you stayed at home and listened to the radio together and that was fun.

When my period first started, I was in 6th grade. And I didn’t know why, but I wasn’t shocked by it because I knew that my mother did the same thing. I didn’t say anything until Mary Terese must have discovered blood on the sheets. She discovered it and asked. And I said, “Yes.” I just knew it was a matter of course. That’s what happens. But I didn’t know why. She told me what to do about it and that was the end of it. I’m sure she didn’t tell me about sex or anything like that. I wouldn’t have asked.

I think Mary Terese was probably half-way between both parents in terms of her personality. She can be outgoing and friendly, and at the same time, she can also be withdrawn. She loved to go shopping and didn’t like to stay home. I don’t know that she likes to really mix with people, either. So I’d say she’s probably a little bit of both of them. Today, I talk to Mary Terese, I would say it about it probably averages out to once every two or three months. I think it’s more than Michael because I tend to go to Michael’s house more than I go to Mary Terese’s. Michael’s is kind of a gathering place. Although I will call Mary Terese, if I’m there. Our relationship has probably stayed the same. Maybe, we’re a little closer.

I don’t remember John much as I was growing up. He was in 8th grade when I started 1st grade. He and his group of friends were around the house a lot, too. And they were good-looking, too. And, but he wasn’t an athlete. Although he was good-looking. Our house was a gathering place. And I think mostly because my mother cooked. And it was a big house and they just loved to come over there. But I don’t remember a whole lot about...I remember just fleeting things. The reading and the stack of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And during the war, he was enrolled in that B-12 program in the navy and went to school in Ames. But he was home all the time.
I don’t know how long or what the circumstance was, but he spent a lot of time at the children’s convalescence home which was up the street from us. And I don’t know why. Well, I was told this, but I also remember because we used to deliver groceries there. I don’t know why he was there. I think he was always kind of sickly.

Oh, I think Johnny’s more on the Porti side. I think he’s rather reclusive. Once, he disappeared for three days, went fishing. We called the police. We didn’t know what had happened. But he loved to go off by himself fishing. Sit in the corner by himself and read. Stack of books and a stack of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Obviously, our relationship has gotten worse since we haven’t communicated in over thirty years. There was a time when he was in the service and I was taking care of things for him, you know. Checking account business, whatever, before I got married. When he wanted something done, he would ask me to do it because I was the one home. When he left the service before he got married, he left a lot of classical records and things. I kind of latched on to them and used to listen to them. I figured there was no sense in them going to waste. When the war started, they had a B-12 where you could join the navy and go to school. During the war, if you had a brother in the navy, it was a big thing to try and get one of his navy peacoats and wear it. That was a big thing when I was in high school. So I kind of took one of his because everyone had one but me. And I was determined. I was going to get one, so I just took it. He could get another. They were giving them to ‘em for free.

Never liked Joey. Joey’s five years older than I am. He never spent a lot of time at home. I never knew why. He used to spend a lot of time with this woman called Maude. Because she just pampered and petted him, he’d come home and be very arrogant. We got to the point where “Why do you come home?” God, we didn’t like him. The family, that is. I remember going over to Maude’s house once in a while, too, ‘cause she made delicious chicken and dumplings. And she made delicious pies. But she didn’t like girls. She loved Joey. And of course he loved all the attention he got. This went on for years. He was always arrogant when he came home. It was like, over there
he was kingpin. I don’t think he liked coming home. I don’t think we liked him because he’d come in and want to be treated differently or better. It was strange.

My fondest memories of Joe were after he got out of high school. Mary Terese was married. And I was an ironer, beautiful ironer. Joey was an X-ray technician at the hospital. He had to wear white. He wanted the military creases in his shirts where they have the two pleats coming down the back, you know. And I was a beautiful ironer. So he hired me to iron his shirts. A quarter apiece. Well, I never got paid. But stupid me kept ironing the damn shirts. Because I took such a pride in it. I was a damn good ironer. I used to iron by the hour. We ironed everything. Pillowcases, handkerchiefs, aprons. My mother wore an apron every day, two or three a day. My father wore butcher aprons. We ironed everything. Everything but sheets, we ironed. And underwear.

I can remember, every day waking to hearing my mother and Joey argue. How she had an obligation to take care of him and keep him and support him until he was 21. And finally, he reached 21, and my mother says, “Well, now I don’t have to anymore” and kicked him out. And that’s when he left. I think he may have possibly always resented her because of Maude or something. I don’t know. He always used to argue. All I remember mostly about him was arguing.

In the last two years, I hear from him at least once a year. He’s taken to calling all of us on our birthdays. We get along the same. I still find him to be obnoxious. Although he has mellowed a little bit, but he’s still obnoxious.

Cristine was, was almost like having a doll. I can remember when she was born. My mother was embarrassed to be pregnant. Because Genevieve was pregnant with Kathleen and it was embarrassing to her to be having her first grandchild and her own child at the same time. I think she thought she was too old.

Cristine is twelve years younger than me. Oh, I loved Cristine. She was my excuse. “Cristine would like to go to the movies. Can I take Cristine to the movies?” She would love to go. Cristine was three, four or five. Well, I didn’t care. I mean, she was an excuse. I loved to take her. She was so beautiful, and she was like a little doll.
Mary Terese and I basically took care of Cristine. My mother didn’t. I think she was so shocked to have had her. Shocked and embarrassed. Mother was forty-two when Cristine was born. She was born in a hospital. First child. My mother was in the hospital with Cristine when VJ day broke. The war was over. She stayed in the hospital ten days when Cristine was born. That’s a long time. And then Cristine had an operation when she was just a few weeks old. She couldn’t hold down her food. So they had to have this operation. She was the first and youngest child to ever be operated on there.

Today, I hear from her at least half a dozen times a year. We’re rather close because I think we’re a lot alike in our thinking and our love of cultural things, reading and music. There’s things that she can talk to me about that she could never talk to Mary Terese. She’s very close to Mary Terese, but there’s certain things that you would not discuss with Mary Terese. For instance, there was a time when she wanted to adopt a baby. And she wanted to adopt a black baby. And she talked to me about it because she knew Mary Terese would never understand that, but she knew I would. Today, we’re probably closer because I don’t think there’s an age difference between us anymore in terms of talking to one another. Although I still think of her as my little sister. Cristine is a little off-center. She’s a little kooky. Very religious. Ultra, too religious. Very, almost, unaccepting in a way. I don’t think she’s too outgoing. More like my father, I would think.

I’m probably more like my father. I don’t talk to people easily. I’m not a very outgoing, gregarious person. I’m more reclusive. But I grew up that way. I was the only child in the neighborhood. I liked being alone. I can remember many times when my family would go out for a ride, we did that kind of thing a lot just to get fresh air in the summertime. I’d just as soon stay home, have the peace and quiet and listen to the radio.

Cristine

When I was a child, Joanne was around. She would have been in her teens. My two sisters were still at home but none of the boys were at home. They were all gone.
Married. I don’t know where they were actually. Of course, I would know where they were if I knew how old they were. Two of them were married in my memory. I remembered Joe’s wedding so he wouldn’t have been married but I think he was already living in Nebraska. Where John was at that point of his life, I don’t know. School or army reserves. Air force... he was in the air force. That is all I know.

I’m supposed to describe Michael in words. Pictures are nicer. I don’t know how to describe him. He has a tender heart toward children. Very practical and likes nature a lot. I’m having a hard time putting it into words. Sometimes he irritates me because I will ask for advice and he doesn’t like to give it. He doesn’t like making commitments or take a stand about something. I mean about practical things he won’t do it. Yes, but he is filled with advice for me but it is specific “Save your money.” “Are you saving enough money? Are you making enough money?”

If I call home and he answers the phone, than we talk for a few minutes than I say, “Where is Lucille?” We’ve had a couple of interesting conversations. He’s written me a few letters when I was in Grenada. He writes very much like my sister Mary. Very much like me. I am not a letter writer. So I’ll get four or five sentences and they are usually disconnected. There is not a paragraph or anything: “The weather is fine. The tomatoes are good; we’ve canned a few.” Whatever, you know.

I remember Michael visiting me in the hospital when I had my tonsils out. I remember him bringing me there and I had to spend the night. I remember him sitting in the living room in his boxer shorts knitting. He had this long closet behind the living room where he stored stuff in there and I remember going in and getting some of his love letters of Lucille’s. I remember I took them into the living room and I started reading them out loud and he chased me all over the room and we were both laughing. He was calling her all these affectionate things and he was so embarrassed. They were very romantic.

When I had to move out of my sister Mary’s house over the weekend and I was upset and crying and I remember Michael coming over and we were just sitting there, and
I was crying and I said, “Why can’t people just love one another?” He got really philosophical about life with me. I was upset because my father and she, Mary Terese...it was not a very nice scene.

I see him twice a year. I think he is more like a brother. He doesn't get real involved in my life. I think all of my brothers and sisters worry about me. He and Mary Terese do the most because I am not married and that was their original mandate when they took care of me. So, when they aren’t around to take care of me, who is going to take care of me? That is the kind of thing. I think there is a sense of responsibility about them.

Frank has always had his own family since I was born because he had his own daughter, too. We’ve never lived together. He had a daughter two months after I was born. I used to spend some time with them when I was little to play with his kids. He is always very generous with me, but I don’t have as much of a relationship with him as I do some of the others. I didn’t really grow up with him. It is so hard to characterize people. I think he is more ambitious than Michael is in terms. I think all of them tend to be cautious people who don’t take too many risks in life. He would be more like my mother, in some ways.

I got the impression that he was always the peacemaker in the family. He was the one in the family that everyone gets along with. He doesn’t irritate anyone. I think my sister Mary thought that he was nice to her. He and Michael are close. Also with John. Not to mention Joe, but Joe was always volatile. I think your mother, too, always felt that he was charming. Just personable. Easy to get along with. I go to visit him twice a year when I am in town. Because I go for dental work and sometimes I go to their house. Usually at Christmas time and usually with Michael. He did call me last week and I was surprised because he was in town in South Bend. That was the first time he has been in South Bend that he called me. They used to go to games but I never saw him. I don’t think we kind of connected. He hasn’t been a big part of my life.

I’ve always felt that Mary Terese has had a very motherly attitude toward me.
Words are hard. She certainly loves her children and her grandchildren. She always wanted to have children. I don’t think she would have gotten married for any other reason except that she wanted to have children. Sometimes I don’t think that she is a very happy person. I’m not so sure why. I knew that she had a hard time with her relationship with my mother. She told me stories that she tells. I think that she is probably a lot like my mother. Well, maybe she is like both. I think she is still independent. All of us are very independent.

I only knew her as an adult. She maybe wasn’t as smart as some of the others. I don’t know what she was like before I came along. I don’t think any of us are as intelligent as we were. Especially me. I have a hard time being as intelligent as I used to be. My intelligence is going down by the year. I remember her being very nice to me when I was little. I remember fighting with her when I had to do the dishes and I remember going with her once to the Fair. I wanted to go on a ride and she wasn’t too anxious to go but I wanted to go on this ride. It was one of those twirling around ones and she went with me and she was very sick. She was very mad at me because I made her go. She was affectionate when I was little, more so than my mother.

I have no memory of John except him showing up at my father’s funeral. I really have no memory of him except that he existed somewhere. He may have come home at some point before my mother died. When I was a little girl, he sent me two gifts that I still have. One was a little Hummel figurine. And the other he sent me a Sunday missal back when they were in Latin. A St. Andrew’s missal. I just treasured those things mostly because they were such unusual gifts.

I have no memory of Joe. I have a memory of a wedding and I went to visit him once when he had children and I stayed. I liked the visit. He is very energetic. I just remember visiting him in Lincoln and I always had a good time. He had lots of friends and he talks a lot. I think maybe he is more outgoing than the rest because he was living away from home in another city. Joe is different, just more sociable. I think part of that was he married into another family and they have a whole Italian community in Lincoln.
that he became part of. When he worked in the grocery store he would be very personable. But, then, Michael is also personable with strangers.

I don’t have a lot of memories of Joanne when she was little. She says that she had to take me everywhere but I don’t remember being there. Well, maybe a movie or two. I remember being in her wedding. I had to wear what would have been a formal dress and the material, I would say, was itchy. I remember her coming over to tell me that Mom had died. I remember your Dad coming to visit. This was just a few months after Mom had died. He came over to the house and brought me a big doll. He was trying to impress my sister. I didn’t know that at the time. I just liked this guy who gave me good presents. It was called a Roxanne doll. He was just getting in good with the family. He wanted to please the rest of us. But it didn’t work. It worked for a short time.

When she was married, out of the house and had babies, I used to go visit a lot. She had Frank. That was just the time that I like kids and I remember Frank and Susan as a baby. I remember spending time with her. But when you kids were older, I remember babysitting a lot. I especially liked it because she knew what I liked to do. All of you would be in bed and she would let me cook a steak, make a salad and watch T.V. or read a book. I was just like her.

I was born late in my mother’s life. I wouldn’t imagine that it was like, “Oh, goody, I’m having a baby.” I imagine that it would be difficult. I don’t think she was very affectionate on one level. I think that was part of the way she was. I think that there are people who find it easier to be affectionate and kind to people who are outside their families. You know, “I love mankind, it is people I can’t stand.” That sort of thing. I think my mother found it hard to be affectionate to the people in her family. In some ways, because you have all the bad stuff to deal with, too.

My brothers and sisters are all older than me. That is my experience of brothers and sisters. Now, it is different when they are closer in age. I think that they were all more like parents to me than brothers and sisters, which wasn’t bad. I think that I missed
out on, as far as the brothers and sisters part goes, is all the fighting and rivalry. I never
had a rival for my parent's affection or anything else. There was no competition from
them. They all had their own lives and I had mine. All that I missed out on. I also
missed out on all the common bonds. So, I missed out on all the stories. I guess I can
read all your interviews when you are done.

*Vimala Pillari (1986) in Pathways to Family Myths writes that families are
governed by implicit rules that prescribe roles and behavior that are beyond the awareness
of the individual members to some extent. They create myths to express avoided topics.*
She lists the myths as follow: 1) harmony; 2) family scapegoat; 3) catastrophism; 4)
pseudomutuality (good families never fight); 5) overgeneralization; 6) togetherness; 7)
salvation and redemption. For the most part, the family autobiographical approach
exposes these myth types and brings us closer to understanding real familial relationships.

Evidence of myths can be found in each of the preceding stories. Some of the
more obvious ones are in the stories of Joey and Tony. According to Joey, he gets along
"fine" with everyone in his family and yet Mary Terese and Joanne tell of the huge fits
that used to occur between his mother and himself. The other siblings tell of how they
used to tease Joey often when he came home from the Nelsons. Joey said that he
remembered no problems when he came home. Frank sees his father as the savior to his
mother's position as scapegoat, causing all the wrong in the family. The other siblings
stories give balance to the portrait Frank paints describing a strong and distant, but not
bad, mother and an unassuming, gentle father. The questions then become not so much
not "what" Joey and Frank remember and are they closer to the truth than they others, but
"why" they remember it that way. On the other hand, Mary Terese paints herself as the
family victim ranking last place to her brothers and younger sisters, seemingly unloved by
both her mother and father. Her perceptions are supported somewhat through the stories
of her siblings particularly John, who was only a year or so younger than her.

More importantly, the picture of family life begins to dispel the myth of the
traditional family in which there is an intense intimacy between spouses and mothers who also have time to maintain a household and be totally available to their offspring. The reality is that all of the family members work together with a hierarchical authority that begins with the parents and older siblings. In the case of the Porti family, only half of the children were allowed extra-curricular activities, while the other ones were expected home after school to either work in the house or the grocery store. Oldest siblings were given stewardship over the younger ones. The Porti family emphasized obedience to authority and order.

"I think we probably were one of the few houses with a fish pond..."

Many of the Italians who first came to Des Moines around the turn-of-the-century followed the railroad and settled near the depot in the downtown area. In the years to follow, many of these Italians moved from the railroad depot area across the Raccoon River to a hilly, larger neighborhood on the Southside (McCoy and Silag 1982). Sixty-one percent of all the Italians in the city were raised there. A smaller group settled on Francis Avenue in the northern part of the city. Handfuls of others, settled in varying locations throughout the city. True to their Calabrian roots, many of the Des Moines Italians did their best to live as close as possible to their place of work, even if this meant being the only Italian family in the neighborhood, as is the case of the Portis.

Michael

Well, the first home we lived in was 14th and Park Street. It was in the black neighborhood and had no tub. All it had was a stool. No sink. Except in the kitchen. Just a one-room shack was really all it was. We bathed in a washtub. Boil water in the kitchen. We lived there up ’til the time Francis was in kindergarten, so I’d been two years ahead of him, in 2nd grade. We didn’t actually fraternize with the black people, except the ones that traded in our store. Which were quite a few. I don’t remember there being any children to play with.

We had no problems with prejudice. We had one real good customer. He came every Saturday, loaded up for the week, and I’d take him home. He lived on 13th and Crocker, just about a quarter and a half mile from the store. I can remember that as I
would go into the house through the back screen, I'd take a big breath and carry the groceries in and set 'em down and try to get back out without taking a breath. And I've read since that that's not that they are not clean, it is just that they cooked a lot of stuff that was different. That you could go into an Italian house and smell a different set of odors. I suppose it'd be the garlic. The olive oil. And whatever. And these black people had their odor. It was horrendous. I remember I read a Pearl Buck book about when she came back from China. She couldn't hardly stand it for a while because of all the smells of the Anglo-Saxons' houses. They got their set of odors, too.

We moved to 21st and Clark, because we needed a bigger house. Like I say, in a two-bedroom, one-room shack, was all it was. You know what it would remind you of? See these pictures of black people down in the south. Little, just a little shack like that. Just a square shack. I don't know whether the first house belong to my mother or to my grandmother. It might have belonged to my grandmother. When they bought the house on Pleasant Street, it was all one piece of these properties with those two houses on it. They got married. And my mother was pregnant fairly soon and they went into that house. Right after they got married.

Twenty-first and Clark was a three bedroom house. Tiny. Two stories and us kids slept upstairs. Boys in one bedroom and girls in the other. And had a bathroom upstairs. Had a bathtub. Oh, a downstairs with one bedroom, dining room, living room, and a kitchen. All but none of the rooms probably not any bigger than this one. Hard to believe. Ten feet by ten feet. We didn't realize it, that it was small, we just played the way we wanted. Well, I can remember Joanne being born in that house. And then Cristine was born in the hospital.

We lived there 'til I was a freshman at Dowling. My freshman year. It was a typical middle class American neighborhood. Right across the street from the school. Had a playground. So we had plenty of kids to play with after school. We'd have football games, pick-up football games, baseball. Big, it was a big playground. Called Gibbon's School. It's gone now. This house is still standing. I think so. I think they
probably paid cash for that house. I think it was only $1200 or $1500 for the house. My mother turned down a house during the Depression. One house for $900, and they just put a brand-new gas furnace in it. And another house across the street from the store was offered to my mother for $2000, I think. Turned that down. They didn’t have any surplus money then.

My responsibilities in this house were to take care of the kids ‘til Mom got home. Boy, did I take care of ‘em. I was the meanest man in town. I’d say from 4th or 5th grade on, I did this. I had to be home every day after school. Like I say, I had tasks assigned for each one, and orders not to wreck the place. Not a hell of a lot they could do, you know. Straighten up. Sweep the floor. Hell, yes, I had to discipline. Every day. (chuckle) I can remember them, them little scoundrels, we’d be playing, having fun. And somewhere during the afternoon, somebody’d cry, you know. They’d get over it, and they’d be playing some more. And all of a sudden, Mom would come to the front door, and like, of chorus, “Michael DID THIS!” and “Michael DID THAT!” But she didn’t listen to them. I wouldn’t let ‘em go outside until they had done their work, something like that.

I did a lot of things wrong. My mother used to take that broomstick after me all the time. Banging me across the back. It didn’t bother me to have to come home. There weren’t a lot of school activities to do. It’s not a case of having to take care of my younger siblings, it’s a case of doing it. Whose side did mother take when I disciplined them? Oh, what side would you take if two little kids are crying and pointing at Michael. Oh, I used to get frustrated. What they thought I should be doing, and what I thought I should be doing were two different things.

My freshman year we moved to 1223 Pleasant Street, where the grocery store was. The stairway on the right, going up the stairs, divided in two. Grandmother had done this. One, two, three...three or four apartments. Tiny, tiny. And you went down the hallway and turned in, there’s a room to your left. Big rooms. With high ceilings. And there was bedrooms, two bedrooms, three bedrooms. Three bedrooms. They were all huge rooms.
Sleep three or four kids in there. No problem. So they split us both into boys and girls. The outside of the house was stucco. We built a garage. I don’t remember exactly when, but I think it was after we moved back there. Had the apartments and then my Dad built a three-car garage and rented it out.

My uncle Johnny Ortale lived with us for a while. Before he was married. He went in the service. Enlisted. This was after Grandma died. That left Johnny and Aunt Laura and Emily. Emily and Johnny were not married. So Johnny stayed with us for how long I don’t know really. Considerable...I’d say a couple of years. And Emily went to live with Aunt Laura. ‘Cause they were left without no parents and no place to stay.

Did any of my brothers and sisters live in the household after we got married? Not for any length of time. Me and Lucille stayed at her mother’s for more than a month. That was right after we were married. After that before we moved across the street, we live about a mile from my parent’s home. Something like that.

Francis

The first house we lived in...I’m trying to think of how many rooms are in it. One, two, three, four rooms downstairs and one, two, and a bath upstairs. Pretty small. I imagine the rooms weren’t any bigger than I suppose ten feet by twelve feet. Michael and I and Mary Terese shared a bedroom. I know exactly how old I was when we moved ‘cause that’s the year I started high school. We were there quite a while. I was born in that house. When the other kids came along and Mary Terese was reaching puberty, you know, we needed more room. When that happened then my mother moved us downstairs into a bedroom down there.

At that time the neighborhood was a real typical, I wouldn’t say middle-class, but lower middle-class, neighborhood. Right now, it’s overwhelmed with blacks, but at that time, there weren’t any even around. Across the street was a playground. And there was a kindergarten there. That’s where I went to my first year of kindergarten. But it was, I don’t remember a lot about it.
Yeah, I had all the responsibilities around the house when I was young. I was the cook. I was the housekeeper. I suppose I did it not because other kids want me to do it. I suppose I enjoyed it. I cooked for Michael and I and Mary Terese. Just whenever the occasion came up. If it was dinner, I did that. If it was lunch, I did that. I told you, at one time, when we were kids, for some reason there was somebody that was at our house ironing. And the ironing board caught on fire. I can remember putting that fire out. I think I probably told you that. The subsequential of that was everybody gave me a nickname, the fireman. We were not a functional family. There wasn’t anybody home when I got home. No one was there.

The second house was the only other house we lived in. That was over on Pleasant Street. Across the street from Methodist Hospital. It was right next door to the grocery store. The grocery store and the house were attached, but you couldn’t stay indoors and go from one to the other. You had to go outdoors. My grandparents owned the grocery store, and then my mom and dad bought it from the estate. But the parents owned the grocery when I was growing up. And my mom and dad operated it.

I tell you, my dad was a genius. My dad built a garage in the back of that house. All by himself, he laid the bricks and mixed the concrete. And put the roof on. He could do anything. He was really good. I’m telling you, my dad was a genius. A genius with no education. Michael and I always wanted a fishpond. So he said, if we wanted to dig the hole for him, he would pour the concrete. So Michael and I dug this little fish pond outside of our house. And we actually put fish in it. And my dad poured concrete in the bottom and everything. And we’d put water in it. And Michael used to go fishing, and he’d catch fish and put ‘em in there. Oh, catfish, carp, roughfish. When winter would come, it would freeze. The fish would die. We’d restock it next year. (chuckle) I think we probably were one of the few houses with a fish pond.

When ever I see the use of this word, it makes me question and wonder, “What is a functional family?” and “How do we measure the state of dysfunctionalism?”
Mary Terese

My job at home was doing most of the cleaning. When I got old enough, I did all of the washing and the ironing. The boys, I don’t know what they did. Well, the hard jobs, like we always had to take the rugs out and beat them. We had to do that every week, put the rugs out on the line and beat. I think they used to shovel, you know stuff like, cut the grass. Then every summer we, my mother did a lot of canning, and we had to squeeze all the tomatoes, which we hated. We hated all those jobs. We talked the neighbor kids and they thought it was fun, so we talked the neighbor kids into coming over and helping us.

The first house we lived in was on Park Street right behind our house on Pleasant Street. It was just a little house, but I don’t remember it really. The next place we moved to was 1443 21st Street. It was a two-story house and it had one bedroom down, two bedrooms upstairs and the only bath was upstairs. Living room, dining room, kitchen. Big back yard, apple trees and so forth. I didn’t share a room. Joanne wasn’t born until I was twelve years old. I suppose we did then.

I remember when she was born. I remember the day she was born. Because we didn’t know my mother was even pregnant. In those days, you couldn’t tell people were pregnant with those dresses they wore. She always felt really good when she was pregnant. She sent us all to the movie one Sunday and when we’d come home, there she was. We were probably excited about it. I know I was because she was a girl and I was surrounded by boys.

Uncle Johnny lived with us and I don’t think Uncle Al was there too long. But, Uncle Johnny lived with us for a while after we first moved to Pleasant street. I’m trying to remember when we moved there, ‘cuz in 1941, that’s when Uncle Johnny went to the Army, and Michael went, too, in 1941.

Twenty-first Street was a typical neighborhood with lots of kids and across the street was a public school. Gibbons school. They used to have in the summertime, you know those playgrounds, that were supervised. Lots of kids in the neighborhood, except
the lady next door was an old witchy lady. She used to steal our balls if they went into her garden.

I had to clean house every Saturday. I had to bake a cake or make some kind of dessert. Usually, it was the one your mother likes with jello and whipped cream. We had to do dishes. On Saturday, me and Francis. Michael locked us in the house while he played across the street. Francis used to take the rugs and beat the rugs. Just regular cleaning. The boys had certain duties like beating rugs. She expected them to do that. When I got older, I had to do all the laundry. All the washing. Mother never did any laundry.

John

The first place we lived in was a small house. I remember there was a downstairs, there was a bedroom and a living room, a dining room and a kitchen. I'm not sure what part of Des Moines it was. It was five or six blocks north of St. John's school. There was another school right across the street named Gibbons. Just a small house. There was a stairs that went up and there were two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. That was it. That was the first house. There was a driveway and there was no room on either side of the house other than the driveway. There was a small backyard. There were three bedrooms. I don't recall the exact sleeping arrangements. I was pretty small in those days.

We moved from there when I was pretty young. When I was in, I don't know, second or third grade. As I recall, we moved to the house beside the grocery store. That's the only other place I had to live. At that time, it was considered to be low to middle-class. It was probably a little upward. The house on Pleasant Street had three bedrooms, a bathroom and a large kitchen. And a back porch. Our upstairs part of the house was three apartments that were rented out. Two bedrooms. Well, I think I shared it with my brothers. Because there was only one room for the boys. They had the back bedroom and the other two bedrooms, my mother and father had one and then the girls
had one. It had a basement. The houses there had piping from the furnaces.

The neighborhood was pretty close to the downtown area. It was mostly apartments. Just down the street was a very large hospital. Across the street was this large deserted house that my mother ultimately bought. It was vacant and we used to play there a lot, when I was a kid. We used to break in the basement. There were a lot of old records stored down there and we used to play in there. And right next to us, was a very large undeveloped area which I think belonged to the school.

Between the school and us, there was one house next to us and then this large undeveloped area which was all sort of overgrown with bushes and shrubs which I loved because again I’d take my BB gun and go over and hunt birds and things in this large area where no one would notice me. We didn’t have any problems with them. Right next to us was a large house which was apartments. Pretty transient population. And on the other side, on the store side was, I think there was a private home. Had a big fence around it and we never saw much of them. Backyard was this large garage with an open area, graveled. And in back of that was this large lot which was planted in garden. So the lot was quite deep actually. Just beyond the back lot was this Negro section.

There was a lot of prejudice at that time. Actually, the little store we had and the house we lived in most of my life there, was only a few blocks from the Negro section. It was on a different street, so walking down the street you would never realize that if you went another block down and cut across a block or so you would get immediately into the Negro section of town. It was very close. It wasn’t part of the Negro section. Very upscale I would say. But there was a lot of prejudice, you know. The Negroes lived down there and everyone stood apart from them. Nobody else was rich, but they were REALLY poor. And I’m sure there was a lot of prejudice. But I didn’t get any of this in my family.

I remember I mentioned before that my mother had this handyman, Henry, who was a black man. And I always got along quite well with Henry. Have you ever seen a moving picture with Step and Fetchit in it? Gangly Negro, very good natured, typical
caricature. There wasn’t a lot of work in those days. So he would work for my mother and she would pay him a dollar or two. And she would always at lunchtime have him come into the kitchen and sit down with us and eat. And I remember thinking that some people would not approve of this. That he shouldn’t be eating in the same kitchen with us. But my mother treated him, he was like just one of the workmen, or one of us. And he redecorated this big house across the street...did all the papering and painting and was a very likeable person.

In a case when I’d go fishing and we’d catch some fish, or I would catch some fish and I would bring them home. My mother didn’t want to fool with them and I didn’t want to fool with them, she’d call Henry and tell him to stop by and get the fish. And he was always very happy to get the fish. I don’t think there was any real...there was prejudice. They were different. But there, as far as I know, there wasn’t any racial problem because they hadn’t been elevated to the status where they could challenge any of the whites. They’d never dream of it. So, as I say, I was always a little fearful when I walked in this Negro section of town. I was all by myself and it was quite a big area several blocks long and no whites would live there. But I would do it and I never had any problem that I know of.

One other thing I remember about the house, is that in the side yard at one point, my older brothers and my dad built a little fish pond. They poured it out of cement and it was sort of a cross. They filled it with water and used to stock it every spring with blue gills and things that we caught down to the river or the lake. I enjoyed that whole outfit. The little pond. Because I think mostly my interests and Michael’s were in fishing. We thought it would be nice to keep some fish. Actually, when I was a kid I remember when I first got there, when it was first dug, I used to fish in it. Catch these fish we’d put in it. Catch these fish we’d put in it.

There were enough kids so there wasn’t any room for anyone else to live in the house. I didn’t have much responsibility around the house, not really. I think I had to mow the lawn maybe. There wasn’t much lawn. I had to spade the garden every spring. That was a big chore. I mean that was a big area to spade. I can’t really recall any other
chores I had. I was pretty self-centered though.

Joey

The home I remember the most is Pleasant Street. It was two-story house. We lived on the first floor and had apartments upstairs. It was typical big living room, dining room, three bedrooms, and a kitchen. A big kitchen and a big bath. Originally, when we first moved in the bathroom was, had the old-fashioned water closet where the, it’d flush by gravity. Big long chain, you pull the chain, and the water, the back of the toilet was up, up overhead. It was just a very unpretentious house. It had a big backyard. And the store was attached to the front, although we had to go outside to get into the store, but it was built onto one corner of it. A big three stall garage behind it. That was, we only had one car, so I don’t know. I don’t know what all was in it. Just junk, I suppose. I think, we built the garage, as I recall. I was pretty young when the garage went up. We had a fish pond. We used to catch fish and put them in there and they’d died. (chuckle)

At first, I had to share a bedroom. Uncle Johnny lived with us for quite a while. I don’t really remember how long, but he did. Before he went into the service, which would be in...when he’d go in the service? I suppose he went into the service at ’42, ’41, probably ’42. He lived there before that. But then, by the time I got out of high school, everybody was gone, in the service. And I left shortly after. But at first, yeah, John and I used to sleep in the back bedroom. And when he left, I had it all.

Though, I do remember the house on 21st Street. Uh, this was during the summer that I can remember. We always used to sleep in the one bedroom upstairs, all four of us. ‘Cause, like I say, we’d read in the summer, and then we’d read by moonlight. Ma didn’t like it very well, but we did it anyhow. (chuckle) The back bedroom on Pleasant Street? No heat. It’d get cold in the wintertime. I used to put more clothes on. (chuckle) My job was I had to mow the lawn. Yeah, we didn’t mow it very often. ‘Cause most of the grass was gone from playing. (chuckle) That was all I had to do.
Joan

The first home I lived in was on 21st Street. I don’t know the address. And that’s where I was born. However, I don’t remember it. I don’t know if I remember it from living there, ‘cause I don’t know when we moved, or if I remember it because somebody we knew bought it. And I used to be there a lot. I don’t know under which context I remember the house. But it was a marvelous house. Big back yard. I couldn’t tell you because I don’t remember the upstairs. But my parent’s bedroom was off the living room downstairs. And there was a huge kitchen, a huge living room, dining room. Um, the back, a small back porch, a big back yard and it was on an alley. And we used to play in the alley. Kick the can and all kinds of games like that. But I don’t know how, but then we moved to Pleasant Street.

Pleasant Street house was two-stories. You came in, and you had to go up from the sidewalk, you had to go up a series of seven or eight steps and then you went up another two or three steps to get in the front porch an enclosed front porch. And there were these two huge, I bet they were ten, twelve, eight...they had to be more than eight feet tall, double doors with glass windows, heavy doors. But only one of them was permanently closed. Although I think you could open it. To go into the front entry there was this big stairway going upstairs and there was this beautiful bannister that I used to slide down all the time. And then there was off to your right, a hallway. But it was an open hallway. There was a door here, on your left, that would go into the living room, but it was always locked. But you would have to go down through the hall to the other which entered into the dining room.

So there was a huge living room with a fireplace that, that in my memory was never used. It was covered over. I mean the grate was covered over with something so that it was never used. A huge dining room with three windows in a circular, where we used to sit, like an alcove. And my parents’ bedroom was off the dining room. Big bedroom. That also had an entrance that went out, so that you could enter that room from outside without coming through the rest of the house. It went from the side yard. The
bathroom, you could go into the bathroom from my parent’s bedroom. There was another, and there was a big, long hallway leading back to the kitchen. The kitchen was in the back of the house. And then there was another bedroom when you first started down the hall, that all these rooms had two entrances. My father added on a room at the back of the house.

There was a porch off of the kitchen. And there was a pantry. A huge kitchen that you could easily eat in and do lots of other things, too. And then the upstairs, when I was a kid, there was four apartments. And then there was a bathroom upstairs that all the tenants had to share. Until my father built on that room, there were just two bedrooms downstairs. Well, the four boys used to share a room. Mary Terese and I had a room, and my mother and dad. Like I said, I don’t remember when we moved there. And at various times, the boys used to be in the big bedroom because it used to have two big double beds in it for the four of them. But at various times, everybody was in it. They would shift bedrooms. I think out of necessity. The back room. That was the one thing my father could never get accomplished...he couldn’t get heat to stay back there. It was an icebox back there in the winter.

Actually, when it came time to where there were no boys left at home anymore, I got to go back there. I didn’t care that it didn’t have heat, it was my bedroom, and it was all mine. And I had privacy, and I loved it. I was probably in my early teens. I loved it. On the walls, it was colored plasterboard like, not like cork, but anyway, you could put pictures up on the wall. Oh, it used to be covered with movie star pictures. The plasterboard was there when I moved in there, but I was thrilled because we weren’t going to hurt the walls.

There was a fish pond that my father built in the sideyard. A fish pond. We had goldfish. We built a little house in the pond, and it was all made out of cement. He built a little house down there, and we would go and get goldfish. And, of course, we would have to drain it every winter. There’d be a lot of times before they’d bring the goldfish, we’d kind of use it like a small swimming pool. We’d get in it, filled with water. It was
very good size. It was probably, it was probably 6’x 9’. And then there was, on each side and on two ends, it would jet out into a little alcove like that. And then there was like this little house for the fish to, you know, go in and out of. The garage, by the way, was brick.

The neighborhood was basically a middle-class, there was mostly apartments. There were no private...very, very few private homes. Mostly apartments and mostly, a lot of these had been converted from homes. And they were mostly working couples. I grew up with no other children in the neighborhood. Once in a while, somebody would move into the house or into one of these apartments in the house next door, and have a kid, but most of the times it was a boy. Um, and we would play together. But I basically grew up in that neighborhood alone.

Pleasant Street was stucco. Brown stucco. And on the side yard, it was, in fact most of the way around, it was covered with vines. And there was lots of trees. And, our house was at the top of Pleasant Street, and it was kind on top. I don’t ever remember it being real hot. But then, in the summertime, we would sit out in the sideyard ‘cause we were, you know, as the sun went down it was, there always seemed to be a nice breeze. But I also think because of all the trees and everything, we always had a lot of shade. In fact, we used to have this neighbor that lived next door to us who got into some kind of quarrel with my mother and dad. And so for spite, he planted this long row of poplar trees so he wouldn’t have to see our house. It was the best thing he ever did, because it gave us wonderful shade. But he didn’t like us for some reason. He had some kind of a quarrel. Oh, my father thought that was the best thing, you know. He used to thank him for planting the trees.

Now it is a parking lot. It was very sad. I took my daughter to the hospital to have her hands operated on, and I drove up there, and I parked in this lot, and all of a sudden it occurred to me that I was parking where my house used to be. It was very sad.
Cristine

We had a huge gigantic house and yard. It looked big to me because I was little. It was a two-story. I don't know if you would describe it as Victorian, but it was certainly turn-of-the-century. I spent a lot of time, I think, by myself being around the house. Wandering around the yard and visiting with the people who lived upstairs. We just had the bottom floor and the top floor was rented out to nurses. I kind of occupied my time myself.

The neighborhood where we lived was mostly apartment houses. Next door was a huge old mansion that they had turned into apartments. So, they were just a lot of old apartments. Across the street, there was a family that was lower middle class, I would say, motorcycle type family. Michael lived across the street in the apartment building. Next door to him was a huge brick apartment. So, it was an older inner city neighborhood of apartments. Big apartment houses. Behind us was the black neighborhood.

I didn't have any responsibilities around the house while my mother was alive. I don't know if my Dad did anything around the house. I guess he worked in the store. My mother did the cooking. She would hire the painters for people who came to paint. That’s all that I remember. But I really wouldn’t have any sense of what was going on in the house. Mary Terese was living there and Joanne was living there when I was little also. So, I have memories of them being in the house with me. I think I have vague memories of sharing a bed with my sister Mary. I remember Joanne having her own bedroom and getting to remodel it and that was a big thrill for her and she painted the walls coral. She was being very far out and wild and getting far out print curtains. That's all I remember. I loved that house. I still have a real passion for architecture.

I used to run away from home. I don’t know why. I used to wander. They found me downtown one day. I think I was about three. I got to wander around a lot. I used to wander down the street. I would just walk off. Or I would hide around the house. When I was about four. They would be yelling trying to find me and I was stuck
in a closet. I was tiny and I got stuck in a closet. I don’t know why I hide. I guess because I just wanted to be left alone.

The interesting points to note in this chapter are how the family moved from living in what was described by Michael as a shack in the black neighborhood to living in a rental community which bordered on the black neighborhoods. The first house, the shack, was on the back side of the lot where the grocery store and the home on Pleasant Street stood. While her oldest were babies, Lena was within walking distance to the grocery store and her parents home. Although it is not a part of any of the memories held by the Porti siblings, one would imagine that she could rely on her mother and her sisters to aid in childcare when she was needed at the store. Once they moved to 21st street, Lena was now able to hire help, usually an Italian niece or cousin that needed the money. Most of the siblings remember that their mother always had help around the home. The finally move to Pleasant Street occurred when Joanne was a baby and most of the other siblings were school age. The move placed them in what would be considered a middle class neighborhood. According to her children, Lena Porti nor any of her siblings would have thought to live in the Southside Italian neighborhood. Apparently because it was easier to be a business owner and live near the business outside the Italian neighborhood. Most of the other self-employed business owners also did not live in the Southside neighborhood.
SIX

OCCUPATION

“I don’t think we ever felt poor,
‘cuz we always had plenty to eat; ‘cuz we had the store”

Pino Arlacchi’s (1983) work Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates depiction of the traditional Calabrian peasant farmers of the Vale of Cosensa as a complex social-economic entity can be applied to the Porti family’s grocery store. The basis of the family-enterprise is that the economic production is integrated within the fabric of the familial relationships. Family roles were influenced by economic roles. Generally speaking, the family-enterprise was under the direct supervision of the father. Di Leonardo (1984:19-21), in summarizing some of the major works concerning the Italian American economics, states that southern Italians in the United States were generally portrayed as impoverished or working class totally immersed in family concerns. They stay in their poor economic condition because their parents (generally the mother) hold the children back by focusing too much on the present, in a rather fatalistic manner.

Arlacchi’s description of the familial relationships appears more relevant to this particular family. Women are viewed favorably in the work force because they enable the family to survive, without taking an outside hourly income. The more a family has to rely on others for its daily bread, the lower its prestige. This could explain John Porti’s willingness to let his wife run the business and the family. His status was only elevated by the success of the family business and the popularity of his wife within the community. Except for Cristine, all of the Portis spent time working in the store, even if that meant giving up other extra-curricular activities and external plans. Thirty-two percent of the Italians in Des Moines owned grocery stores at one time.
Michael

I think my grandparents came from practically nothing. Where they got their money in Italy to get here, I don’t know. When they got here, they went to work at City Market and got money there. I would imagine that wherever they lived in Des Moines, there probably was a little garden somewhere ‘cause everybody had one, in every house. Nobody had a backyard; they had a garden. Not as a commercial venture but for personal use. They must have been very hard workers and saved their money.

My grandparents got the capital to build the grocery store from a stand they had at the City Market at 2nd and Locust. They would sell strictly produce: apples, oranges, bananas, lettuce, celery, carrots and all that kind of stuff. All produce. No eggs or butter. A green grocer. At that time, there were several wholesale houses where they would ship things in to Iowa from California, Florida or Texas. That’s where they got their produce for the stand.

The City Market was a building where you would rent out stall space that were,

37During the summer of 1994, I learned from Lena Ortale Porti’s only living cousin in Belsito that the Ortales were famous for their ability to find mushrooms. At one time, they ran a large mushroom stand and this cousin suggested that this is where Antonio Ortale and the rest of his siblings (only two out of the eleven remained in Belsito) gained the money to emigrate. Family folklore has it that the Ortales left Belsito, not because of extreme poverty, but for the better opportunities offered them in the New World (several went to South America, also). During my 1989 stay in Belsito, I spent many hours talking to a now deceased Ortale cousin who had lived in Chicago and knew the Ortales of Des Moines. According to her, her Uncle objected to Lena and John’s marriage because of the Porco’s low family status in the Old Country.

38My grandparents moved to Des Moines from Kingston, New York, in 1911, worked in the City Market and then purchased the lot on Pleasant street in 1918 for $6,000. According to the deed, this lot included the house and the smaller house where John and Lena Porti lived when they first married in 1919. The grocery store was built as Lena’s dowry and ownership of it was always hers. In 1931, after her mother’s death, according to her children, she purchased the Pleasant Street house from her siblings for $6,000.
I’d say twelve feet wide. Maybe it was fifteen. Up against the wall, there was a row of them. They were run by practically all Italians. Oh, and a couple of them Jewish fellahs. One of them used to run a cheese, you know, he sold cheese. Another sold only bananas. I used to help ‘em, he used to let me work for him for a while when I was able.

The permanent part of it was mainly Italian. There was an inside City Market and an outside. The outside was used in the summertime. No heat, and open to the weather. It had a roof over it. Different gardeners would bring their stuff that they raised themselves. Some of them were Italians. Most of them were German.

I can remember working for Nonna in the City Market. Aunt Emma had a stand and then Aunt Laura had one. In the summertime on Saturdays, when I got old enough to be good help, I became like a little leg man at the City Market. They used to have lockers downstairs to keep stuff. You had to bring clean lettuce and celery and all that stuff upstairs and sell it. And she had us kids do the leg work. We’d help clean lettuce and package up lettuce leaves and sell ‘em to people for chicken feed. Big gunny sacks for ten cents apiece. Take it home and give it to the chickens.

Nonna spoke English, yeah. But she’d always revert to Italian. As far as I could remember. I understood her, just a little bit, not much. A lot of times, they would talk about me, and I could tell what they were talking about. I couldn’t speak it at all, except like a word, like buon giomo or something like that. As far as making some sense when they were talking to me, I got lost.

My grandmother was old-fashioned, yeah. They were all old-fashioned. Oh, they all wore their hair in a bun. And they all cooked and baked and took care of the house. Worked, too. They all worked, all ‘em women. Emma worked at the market. Laura worked at the market. That’s the way it was. Talk about working holidays, they all worked everyday.

I remember, I used to go down there at six o’clock in the morning and stay until nine o’clock at night. My grandma used to give me two dollars, which was good money. An hour. Six to ten hours. Sixteen dollars a day. Well, that was a pretty good wage for
a little kid. My uncle Johnny used to raise hell ‘cause I got better pay than him. “You’re giving him too much,” he’d say. “Too much?” She’d say, “I’m the boss here. Maybe I’ll give him it all, he is my grandchild.”

I started there when I was probably, I don’t know, ten? We always fooled around a lot, when we had time. Oh, yeah. But we worked all day long. Trimmed lettuce and bring it up, wash it. Trim celery, clean it, and wash it, take it up. The stall that they had were kind of build it low to high. Then they’d make displays of oranges, just like they do at the store now. They’d pile them up and people would come down and buy them, two or three dozen oranges at a time. They were cheap oranges. And, that’s how they sold.

The City Market was in existence up until I was twenty. Just about the war years. Then through the war years, it kind of fell to the wayside. Grocery stores were kind of coming on, and there’d be more master merchandising. People didn’t get to town like they used to and haul stuff all the way home. People usually shopped once a week.

My parent’s store was early on called John Port Grocery. He just Americanized his name. I don’t know why. I never asked him. I don’t remember my father doing anything else but owning a grocery store. It was located at 13th and Pleasant. It was twenty feet by thirty feet. Very small. In there, we had a meat case, one of the very first Amana cases. The store was opened until nine o’clock at night. Monday through Saturday. Opened half a day on Sundays until one o’clock or so.

Neighborhood grocery stores were very common. There was one a block west of us, two blocks south of us, a block north, two blocks north of us. And then another one four blocks west of us. Every three or four blocks, there was a little grocery store. In our neighborhood, they were run by either Italians or Jews. Basically that’s the way it was. There were a few large stores. There was an A&P. Was stuff cheaper at A&P than at a small store? I have no idea. I don’t know why Italians ran grocery stores. But it is a fact.

My mother ran the store. It means my father was there as a butcher and he spent his time there, but she ran it. However, my father did everything except buying. He
waited on customers and stacked the shelves and made change. Took care of the meat counter until I got big enough to do it. Nobody did the books. There were no books. Books were incidental. I don’t even know if they filed income tax. Through the years, the store stayed the same size. Later on the sales increased.

Mom took care of the buying. There were several wholesalers around town. There was Hoxy Fruit Company, Western Food Company, Grocery Wholesale, CCTabs. They sold regular grocery stuff, and then in addition had a produce section. She would just go in there and say “Apples, how much are apples a bushel?” If you liked the price, then you bought them. From one day to the next you get an idea of what the story is for each place and you bought from the place with the best price. She was very shrewd. She would take stuff that people would throw into the barrel and make salable items out of it.

My mother’s first stop, when she went to the wholesale houses, was the one where there was a dump barrel. I think the stuff was pretty bad that they couldn’t be sold, and sometimes they’d dump ‘em. She would go through there and pick out peaches which were half-rotten. She’d gather all them and take ‘em home. We had an old lady, you know Joey’s Maude, was really hard up ‘cause her husband was a coal miner. She would take her all this stuff. And Maude would can it and then my mother and her would split it. My mother would give her the sugar to can and furnish the jars for her part of the deal. And they would can the stuff. If there were apples, she’d bring apples. Maybe she’d make four or five pies. And to spread goodwill at the wholesale house, she’d give the guy a pie. You know, stuff like that. All kinds of stuff.

There was a lot of hanky panky going on, too. Like guys would, this one guy, he’d take some rotten onions, these onions and shallots used to come in barrels all iced down. We didn’t have much refrigeration then so they’d put it on ice. And he would put the rotten onions on top of a barrel of good onions. He’d get the guy to look in on the thing and say, “Hey, how much are these onions? They look pretty bad.” So instead of having to pay five or six dollars for a barrel of onions, he’d pay a dollar. Stuff like that. A lot of that going on. Frankly, my mother got some pretty good deals, sometimes. And
later on, I got some pretty good deals. Not in an illegal sense, just because they like ya'. And somebody was gonna get the stuff. I learned this from my mother. Just from watching. Learned by example.

I started working at the store when I was, I think eight. In 3rd grade, Mom bought me a pair of roller-skates. The only hitch was that with the roller-skates, I had to skate down to work and help my dad on Sundays. I’d go to Mass and then go on down to the store. Stayed with him until one o’clock. I had dinner with him, then we’d drive home. Later on, when I got a little older, she bought me a bicycle. None of the other kids got a bicycle. That was a family bicycle. I used it most of the time. I used it to go to the store.

In high school, I was condemned to helping at the store after school. Winter and summer. When I was there, no one else worked at the store. Except that for a couple of summers, I think it was maybe two summers, I just raised hell. “How come Francis didn’t have to work at the store, and I did?” He was over at Dowling and a football star and all that stuff. So I got a couple summers, alternating weeks. I think it was only eight weeks. Anyhow, I got to go play. Went out to the river and swam. That don’t last long. Pretty soon, he was too involved in school, and he had work on Sundays.

Yeah, Frank got to do sports instead of working in the store. Well, he played baseball. Basically, when he got up to sport’s age, he was free. Which I thought was terribly unfair. It made me mad at the time. “How come he don’t have to do it,” “How come I have to do it?” Well, I had to do it ‘cause I was a few years older. It was right to my parents. And when my kids later asked the same question, “How come I got to do this, and he doesn’t?” I respond, “It’s because I told you.”

We used to have at least five or six customers that we delivered to. They used to like my dad’s hamburger. We used to deliver to Mrs. VanDyke and the lady that ran the KRNT theater, Mrs. Clark or Mrs. Moore. They were from all over the city of Des Moines. There were other grocery stores closer to them, but they liked my dad’s meat. I used to deliver clear out to Beaverdale. And out on Harding road and on Cottage Grove
Avenue. Way past Drake. Mrs. Clark lived out on Beaverdale. I’d deliver generally on Saturday. I’d load up the car with four or five orders, big orders, we used to supply all their groceries. Mrs. VanDyke wanted a rump roast every Saturday. They’d pay once a week or once every two weeks. I don’t remember. But those were all charge customers.

Oh, I paid myself for working at the store. I used to say, “Look, I ain’t working for nothing.” I’d tell mother, “I’m going to take money out.” And I did. When there was something that I really wanted. I bought myself a gun. I bought a .22. A .22 rifle. I saw this gun, and I wanted it. So I used to take a quarter a day until I had enough to buy the .22. For five years after high school, I lived at home. I had a ball. Get to go duck hunting or squirrel hunting in the afternoon, if it was a really nice day. And if it was the wintertime. After I got my meat cut, there was generally about two or three hours in the afternoon there was nothing to do. Dad took a nap; Mom was working at the store. She could handle it a lot easier then because we were living there then. The store was right next door. I continued to help at the store after high school. There was no pressure for me to marry. Glad to have me. I know she was glad to have me.

After I got out of high school, I helped in the spring a couple times at the Spizetto’s. They had a garden. Gardeners. God, I don’t remember what I got paid from the Spizetto’s. Probably got a dollar an hour, which probably would have been pretty good. Just a laborer. Cleaning out the strawberry patch; cleaning out the raspberries patch. Cleaning out the rhubarb patch. In between the time I went in the service and after I got out of high school, I also worked for this guy for a couple of years. Maybe only a year, driving the truck for the plumbing company.

My grandparents never helped at the store. They gave the place as mom’s dowry in 1919. My mother and Dad kept the store through WWII. Then my Aunt Laura inherited it. My mother sold it to her. She rented the building to her and sold her the groceries. Mother kind of freelanced a little bit after this. She’d got connections and she would buy damaged flour. That was one big item. She would call these Italian women around town, and sell them twenty-five pound bag of flour, damaged goods. She
supported herself and the family. They did real well. They also had the apartment house.

After my grandparents died, I must have been seven or eight when my grandmother died, my mother was the only one with enough funds to liquidate the estate by buying the house. So she bought the house and we had the store and the house. The house had...one, two, three...four little apartments. And after the war, there was a little excess money, so she bought and remodeled the house on Pleasant street where I used to live after I was married. She made four or five apartments out of that. During the war, the grocery store was profitable enough to pay for these apartments. After my mother and father died, I wound up with the house. I can remember that one apartment rented for $75 a month. It was one room with a bed in the room. It was a good size room with a little kitchenette and a little bathroom. This was around 1947.

By the time I got out of the war, we didn’t have the grocery store. My dad was ailing and she rented the store to Jimmy. Shortly before she got ill, she took the store over again. Mary Terese and my mother were trying to run the store together and that didn’t work. They didn’t get along. Well, my mother was very funny. She just did it and you did it her way. And she used to say, “I want the stand picked up by the time I get home.” And then she wouldn’t tell us anything else about it. And I’d do it. When I’d do it and then when she got home, she’d change it all. Well, I got to a point where I said, “To hell with it, I won’t do it.” But that time I was old enough to get away with it, too. Well, anyway, but then she was sick.

Meanwhile, my Uncle John came home from the war. He had been in the produce business, working for different people. He had had a place of his own. One of the things they used to sell were celery hearts. So we got started, he and I, we made a tour of the wholesale houses looking for celery that wasn’t in too good of shape on the outside. And we could peel all that junk off and cut it off and you’d have a celery heart. And we’d wholesale them to a chain of stores, subway stores.

Did that for about a year. And then this place opened up downtown. We came and saw it, actually Johnny saw it. I didn’t go down there. We rented this ex-hotel
lobby. We ran a produce stand for '47, '48, '49, '50, '51, '52, '53, '54. We went through 1954. And then I operated one by myself. That was a busy corner. It was 7th and Locust. It’s toward downtown. Empty hotel building there. We rented the lobby portion. We didn’t even have a conventional storeroom. ‘Cause the back of our store was a hotel, open to the public. Except they locked the doors at night. I did that for eight or nine years.

Basically the same process as the City Market. You’d go to wholesalers and buy what you wanted. If they didn’t have celery, Johnny would call a friend of his that he used to buy from in Kansas City and there was more stuff available there. And we could buy small celery. And made it possible to trim it down, clean it up and bundle it and sell it. We used to get three dollars a dozen. We’d meet this guy down on Court Avenue in the morning, and he had a list of his subway stores, and he’d say, “Give three dozen to this store, and three dozen to this store.” We did that.

After we did that for about a year, we rented the lobby in the hotel and stayed there until Johnny Ortale died. Died in his sleep. He’d had a heart attack. Several years before the war. He’d had a heart attack soon after we’d owned the fruit stand. I had my mother help me and had Lucille help me. Before we had any kids. And then he recovered. And he lived several years after that. Woke up one morning, his wife said, he was laying there with a trickle of blood coming out of his mouth. Dead. That would be a shock, wouldn’t it?

Francis

I worked at the store ever since I could remember. Time we started would be in grade school. I was the guy that painted the signs on the window, and I arranged candy in the candy case. Arranged the vegetables and the fruits. Stocked the shelves. Waited on customers. Michael used to do all the bookkeeping. And I guess I did everything else. We didn’t get paid. If I wanted money, I’d go to the cash register and take it. (laughter) That was pretty simple.
I can only tell you of what I did at the store. Michael was always the mathematics genius. I was the guy who put signs on the window and stacked the cans on the shelf, sweep, do all that kind of stuff. I never did do any butchering. Michael could butcher, but I couldn’t. Oh, I didn’t have to. He did. And then, of course, my brother Joe did a lot of the butchering, too. I was never around that much because I was a student. I got married when I was twenty-one. So I kind of, more or less, moved away. I was the first one married in the family.

My dad changed his last name. At the time, it was WWI, and we had a brick thrown through the window of our store, and my dad decided that, you know, enough of that, he just took the vowel off the name. And went by John Port. As a matter of fact, I could not find a birth certificate for myself, for years and years. Well, he changed our name so we wouldn’t be recognized as being from Italy. No, I knew what my name was. It was only on the store that he put Port. But when I was, I couldn’t find a birth certificate. Matter of fact, to go to Italy, I had to get an affidavit from Michael and Mary Terese that I was their brother to get my passport. I have only found this out about five years ago. I said, “There’s just got to be a birth certificate.” So I went over to the, oh, what do they call it? They keep those records. One of the state buildings on the east side. But I went over there and said, “I’m gonna find this thing come hell or high water.” I’m in there and I says, “Have you got a birth certificate,” and I gave ‘em my name and so forth. “Well, what was your Mom and Dad’s name, and what year.” And all of a sudden, a light went on. I said, “Do you got it under Port? P-o-r-t?” And he went back, and they had it. When I was born, he was using the name Port. I also knew about him changing his name when he came from Italy, too. But I didn’t know it at the time. I found that out ‘cause my uncle Jim, you know, was there. And he come back, and says, “Do you know what your name means in Italy?” And I says, “What?” He says, “Pig.” I didn’t know Porti was the word for pig.
Mary Terese

It wasn’t a big store. ‘Course in those days, you didn’t have all this, variety, a hundred different kinds of each item. I mean, then we didn’t. Well, right up the street was another little store, Mrs Green’s store. Two blocks north there was another Jewish grocery store, and then about two blocks north of that there was another Italian people’s grocery store. We did a lotta business with the doctors and nurses and you know from the hospital, Methodist. We only lived a half a block from the hospital.

Our grocery store was meticulously clean, and I think that made a lotta difference. I mean she was a fanatic about that. She was an honest business person. Mom did all the buying for the store, and she stocked, she displayed all the fruits and vegetables. We used to buy bananas in a big thing she used to hang up. We used to cut ‘em off whatever they wanted to buy.

When us kids got old enough, we’d take care of the canned goods, keep the shelves stocked. Mom did all the buying. My dad opened in the morning, cut all of the meat, went home, took a nap and then returned to close the store every day of his life. My mother’d come home in time to fix our supper and then she’d go back to pick up my dad. He’d close the store at nine. She’d bring him home, and she’d cook for him.

When she’d go down to the wholesale, if they had like a bushel of apples that weren’t too good, they’d give ‘em to my mother. She’d take ‘em home and make a lot of apple pies. She’d bring most of the apple pies down to the wholesale, and let them eat them. They gave her a lot of stuff that needed to be used. Like something that was spotted or half rotten. My mother made wonderful pies. She was a good cook. If somebody dropped in, you didn’t even know where it all came from, she could just whip up a big dinner. Sundays she always cooked a lot on Sundays. Oh, we always had pasta. Usually either fried chicken or stuffed peppers, or stuffed eggplant. That was the one time that we all ate together at the same time, ‘cuz see my dad was never there. Back in the beginning, I don’t think the store was open on Sunday. After we moved to Pleasant Street, I always hated that I had to work on Sundays. I worked ‘cuz the boys were off
doing whatever. I always had to work in the afternoons in the store when I was seventeen or eighteen.

I liked to go with Mom to the City Market because there was this Jewish bakery across the street. They had the best bagels and rye bread. And then in the market upstairs, if I was lucky, we’d go eat lunch that they had for twenty-five cents. They had roast beef sandwich, mashed potatoes and gravy and all, and they had the best pie.

The City Market was on 2nd, between Locust and Grand, and it covered a whole city block. They had stands and an inside and outside. The inside they had all stands and it was fresh vegetables and fruit. Aunt Laura had a stand and Aunt Emma had a stand. My mother never did. Emily had a stand outside. There was a lot of competition.

When I got a little bit older, Aunt Laura used to let me work for her at the market and I thought that was really big time. She paid me a little bit. I thought, it was really terrific ‘cuz you just had a big apron. When you sell something, they didn’t have a cash register. You just put it in your pocket. Besides that, right next to her stand was this really cute boy that I liked. He became a priest. He was Italian. Mostly Italians owned stands. There was other people that weren’t Italian. But mostly, I think it was Italian people.

There was a fish market. One guy just sold fish. There was another one that used to sell homemade peanut butter. On the outside, there were ladies that sold chickens, fresh dressed chickens and stuff like that. We never bought a chicken in a store. We always killed our own chickens.

My dad would never kill ‘em. My mother had to kill ‘em. She was that kind of a woman (laughter). Sometimes she used to put a bushel over ‘em and leave their heads out and then whack it with an axe or something. She’d cut their head off and then she’d let it out. This headless chicken, poor thing, would hop around until it died, bled to death. Wasn’t that mean? I dunno if my mother ever did that but some people used to wring their neck. Just twirl ‘em around ‘til their neck snapped. It was cruel! Can you picture that? Killing those chickens? And then you put ‘em in hot water and pull all the
feathers off, cut 'em open and pull all the insides out. I did that. I liked to do that. I mean, I didn’t mind. I was probably ten, twelve years old, at the time I started cleaning chickens.

I don’t remember the Depression. The Depression was 1929 and I was born in ’23, so I was only six years old. During the war, I remember you know we had the red and blue stamps, and we couldn’t use a lot of butter, or you couldn’t buy a lot of meat. Everything was rationed. During the Depression, we had a grocery store. Kids, if they’ve got enough to eat, they are happy. I don’t remember us doing without anything. I don’t think we ever felt poor, ‘cuz we always had plenty to eat; ‘cuz we had the store. My mother went shopping twice a year. She’d go to Younkers. She bought everything at Younkers. She’d buy all our winter clothes. In the spring, she’d buy all our summer clothes. We always had nice clothes.

I don’t think I went to work, outside of working at the store, until after I graduated from high school. I’d work for a while and then my mother would tell me that she needed me at the store. I never stayed at one job for long. When I was in eighth grade, I used to go in once-in-a-while in the afternoons when my father used to take a nap. I’d go in if my mother needed me. I loved it in the store. I liked to be around people. We stocked shelves. We just had the one cash register and totaled up the bill by hand or whatever.

One Christmas, Michael gave my mother $400, I think it was $400. He had taken money out of the cash register just to see if they would have noticed that it was missing. Back then, when they put in money in the register for the day, they didn’t keep track of how much they put in for the day. I think he had been taking the money over most of the year. That didn’t make them change their ways. If I was going downtown shopping, I would just open the cash register and tell mom that I was going to take ten dollars or whatever. Or, she’d hand me the money.

I worked there and Michael. But Francis was involved in sports. He played football, baseball, and basketball. Michael was at the store, I think more than Francis
was. The only thing Francis did at the store, was make all the...we had big plate windows in front of the store and that's where they put all the signs like the price of strawberries, bananas and so forth. Francis made all the signs. He was good at that. He could print real good.

I graduated in 1941 and I was supposed to go to nursing school. Everything was all set. I was going the next year, and the war broke out in December 1941. Then I couldn’t go to nursing school, 'cuz Michael was going into the service. I had to stay home and work in the store. Well, I wasn’t too thrilled about it. Then at different periods of that time, my mother let me get a job outside of the grocery store. I worked for WHO once, for a coupla years. I loved that. It was my favorite job. I was the receptionist in the executive offices. It was just a lotta fun working there. Every time I’d get a job that I like, you know, somebody always made me quit the job to stay home and work in the store. I hated that. I had some jobs I just loved.

John

I think at the time, I thought they were in the grocery business because my grandfather left it to her. Times were tough. See, this was deep in the Depression. If you had your own little business and could feed your family out of it, that obviously was a great advantage. It was THE business to be in, I thought. And later on, I even admired her even more for thinking of such a wonderful way to raise a family in the Depression. The ideal way, I thought. There weren’t really many businesses during the Depression. Few people were working and times were tough.

I think small grocery stores were all there was then. My mother got along very well with people and she had a lot of faithful customers who would call her on the phone and order something. She would fill their order and my brothers or I would deliver it to the people either on foot or in the truck. It was all very simple. You bought things for cash and sold them for what you could and the difference was what you lived on. I felt even in that time, this is a great business to be in if you had a big family, because you
more or less eat free. That’s included in the thoughts of doing business.

The grocery store was quite a ways from where we lived at first. Ultimately, we moved right next to the store. At that time, it was fairly odd that we lived quite a ways from the grocery store. Clear across town. It was a real long walk, possibly two or three miles, maybe one. The grocery store was just a one-room place. I would say it was probably thirty feet by forty feet. There was a meat counter across the back end of it and behind that was a butcher block and then there was a small storage room behind that. There was just this one large room with shelves on the wall, in the front the windows.

At that time, all the produce was perishable. It was all brought in by trucks and you had to judge what you were getting. The price was very variable, too. So you’d go to several produce houses and one of them might have the best lettuce and one of them might have the best peaches. It was all trucked in. Fairly fresh, not what it is nowadays. So you had to get the best bargains, and you would bargain a little. My mother was very sharp in picking up distressed items that they would want to get rid of. She’d offer them a couple of dollars for it and they’d want to get it out of there and they’d say, “Fine.” So then, she’d tell me what we could do to save what was there. I quickly noticed that she was very good at this and she really made some great buys in doing this and made a lot of money doing it. Well, it was all very friendly. Most of them were men, of course. You didn’t see many women around except for her. She’d usually do a little banter, give them cake and a little bargaining. It wasn’t out-and-out banter, it was bargaining sort of, on the fringe, of talk. But she wasn’t at all flirtatious.

We always had a car. Had to with the store, you see. You had to go down and buy the fresh produce and things. I think most other people had automobiles. I know when I was in high school and we were a little more affluent, my mother used to trade the car in every couple of years. I was very proud of the fact that she’d take me along to buy the new car, you know. You know you could trade in for a couple of hundred dollars. You’d give them your old car and get a new one. She’d ask me what color I liked, that sort of thing. One of the last cars she bought was a station wagon with a real wooden
body that I thought was really neat.

She could drive very well. She was kind of short so she had a little trouble reaching the pedals. I used to drive around with her an awful lot when she was going to the wholesale houses. I recall for many years, we were downtown once and she was looking for a parking space and she made the comment that she couldn’t park someplace or she would get pinched. It was obviously terminology for she’d get a ticket or something. It stuck in my mind this getting pinched and I asked her, “Getting pinched?” and she said, “Oh, yeah, you’ll get pinched.” And so this stuck in my mind for quite a few years. I thought somebody will pinch you. This made the traffic log. But she was a good driver and she did a lot of driving. But it was fairly unusual. I think that was part of my feeling that people admired my mother. I always felt it was because she did a lot of these things that weren’t done by women, very often at that time anyway.

We kids had to work in the store. I probably worked the most when I was starting high school, after Michael left for the Service or went to college. It was no set time. My mother would just ask me if I would do something. I did it or maybe I might get out of doing it. I used to enjoy working in the store. I used to particularly like arranging the produce section. Pile up the oranges and things. Stock the shelves with cans. I used to wait on the people that came in. I enjoyed parts of it. I didn’t like waiting on people in there. I did enjoy just sort of organizing the shelves and arranging the produce and that sort of thing. I remember when my mother used to go shopping in the morning and she’d get the strawberries for the day and she’d get several flats of strawberries. It was my job to go through them and rearrange them in the baskets so they were looking nice. While I was going through, I would pick out the very best berries. I’d have this one perfect box. As for my reward for doing this, that was my box. I’d take it and eat it. Well, I didn’t like to work. I was very lazy. I preferred to read, or play with my BB gun or go fishing. I think I did it reluctantly but I think I enjoyed parts of it. I didn’t get paid, but my mom would give me money.

We would often visit the City Market when she went shopping for produce. If you
wanted to get some fresh produce, some fresh green beans or something, that wasn’t trucked in, just grown locally, we’d go to the City Market, or the fruit stands, local little produce farms around the area. That was mostly Italian, too. Practically all Italian, I would say.

I used to go down there with my mother when she was buying wholesale for the grocery store. Aunt Emma, had a stand down at the public market. I would go down and work for her on Saturdays. Most of the produce down there was sold on Saturday. Everybody would come to the public market. And I used to go down there and work on Saturdays. Selling watermelons and things. In fact, I thought it was great fun. Yeah, she paid me a couple of dollars, which was quite a bit at that time.

My uncles were all in the grocery store business. Uncle Al, in another part of town. He was married and he had a bigger grocery store. He was more successful. Ours was always sort of low-keyed. Uncle Joe left Des Moines early and supposedly wasn’t very successful. But he managed. He managed big grocery stores. The phase of the first big grocery stores was coming in when I was along in high school. He managed a couple of these and did very well at it.

Uncle Johnny was in various parts of the produce business, mostly in the wholesale end. And once or twice, he would go off in a truck and go to Colorado and load it up with peaches and bring it back to Iowa and sell it. If you were successful, you could make a mint. Or if you didn’t know what you were getting and weren’t very sharp at it, you might lose your shirt. Another one of her sisters had a small grocery store. I always got the idea that she was very unsuccessful at it though. That was her sister, Emma. I think they were very unsuccessful at it.

I had a pretty good relationship with my uncles. The uncles that were there in town. John and Al, I got along quite well. John was an avid golfer and I used to caddie for him. And he was a card player. And when he got a card game, I’d sort of hang around with the card game and he’d give me a nickel to get him a beer or a bottle of pop. The truth is I was glad to get anything. As a caddie, I know I was always impressed that
he used to do a little gambling on the golf matches. He would win so he’d give me, if he won anything, he’d usually give it to me. It might be a dollar or two dollars, which was a lot of money then. And then he’d always buy me an ice cream soda. About the only time I got ice cream.

When I was in high school, they gave away the store. I guess we didn’t need it any longer. The finances got to the point where they didn’t have to work that hard. They gave the store to another of my mother’s sister Laura. They had the store for several years. I don’t think they did very well at it either. You had to be sort of smart and sharp to do very well in the grocery store business in those days.

I don’t think my mother did anything after they sold the store. She never held a job. Well, actually what she did was, I’m not sure, this sort of runs together anymore. Age sequence, I’m not too clear. There was a big house across the street from the store, when we lived there, and she bought that house and spent a couple of years remodeling it. It had been deserted for many years. It was a real mansion. The story was that the governor used to live there. It was real run down. Nobody had lived there for years and she completely redid the whole place. And made apartments out of it.

Oh, I don’t know how they bought the apartment building. Yeah, I’m fairly certain everything was cash back then. There wasn’t any credit. I don’t know if they had a bank account. Doing business you would think they would have. They didn’t keep large sums of money around the house, I know. When my dad came home at night, he would always bring the money with him in a sack. I think probably if they took in a couple of hundred dollars, it would be a fairly good day. Then, a lot of business was done on Saturdays, the weekends. Later on when the war started and when I was in high school, things were much better off. There was more money flowing. People had jobs and the economy really picked up and there was a lot more of a cashflow through the business.

I can remember at least one summer, she had a Negro handyman who lived a few blocks from us. Henry. He worked all that summer and I was helping him. And my
brothers were working. If you had any free time you went and worked on this house, painting, fixing things, papering. And then she rented it all out because we lived in an area where there was big demand for small apartments. People that worked downtown in the insurance companies. It was very entrepreneurial.

Another thing, and I think it was her doing, behind this grocery store and house there was this big garden area and she built a large garage there. I think it was three or four stalls and then she rented this out to people. Pretty smart. All she had to do was put this up and they pay her to use it. I don’t recall who built it. She had it built, I know. I thought it was a smart way to get money. We lived right on the edge of the downtown area where leaving a car on the street or something was not too feasible.

Joey

I started working at age twelve. Every day I worked. Cut meat every day. Seven days a week. “Pleasantview Market” it said on the neon sign out front. Dad went by Port, John Port. The store was a rectangular building that was probably twenty, twenty-one or twenty-two feet wide and probably thirty feet deep. Which included the back room and where we had a coal stove and a wood stove or whatever we could afford to burn in it. And no hot water. Just a little old sink back there, just a bare sink, you know. No hot water.

We did business with blacks. We got along with them well. Our back yard was on the colored part of town, at that time, in Des Moines.

The groceries would come on a truck from the wholesale house. Dry grocery stuff. And they would pile the stuff in the middle of the room and either I, Johnny, Francis or Michael, whoever, didn’t make any difference, we would stand there and open cases. And one would stand on each side, and we’d just throw the stuff to ‘em. We didn’t have to carry anything, we just pitched it, and we’d catch it and put it on the shelf. (chuckle) That’s the way we used to stock the shelves. It was fun.

Heavens no, we never got paid for working the store. Well, we didn’t go out in
the first place. But if you wanted money, you asked Mom for it. And she’d just give you some, if you had it coming. The bookkeeping was done in the store from pocket to pocket. You put it in your pocket. You pay the bills. What was left, was yours. That’s all he did. He had a little book and all he did was write down what he paid out each day and how much we took in each day. I don’t know what he did with it, but he wrote it down in a book. Oh, sure, people bought on credit. We had charge accounts. We never got, to my knowledge, we never lost a dime on those accounts. People just didn’t do those kind of things to you in those days.

One Christmas, Michael walked down to the front room after we’d opened up all of our presents, and he come back with a little Prince Albert tobacco can loaded with ten and twenty dollar bills. And he gave it to Pop and says, “I stole this from you.” He says, “I was just trying to show you that you had to keep books or you don’t know where the money goes.” I don’t really remember Pop. I don’t think he was mad. But it surprised him. As I recall, it was $1500. I think Michael was probably a senior in high school.

As soon as we got home, we went to the store and went to work. I worked and Michael worked in the store. Francis was in athletics. John was in athletics. So Mary Terese, Michael and I worked in the store. And the store was open until nine o’clock and we were there, ‘til nine o’clock. We weren’t down there every night, but most nights. Michael worked because he was good at it. Why didn’t Michael go out for sports? ‘Cause he just didn’t have that interest. Mary Terese was a girl, and so there weren’t any girl athletics then. John wanted to play basketball. He did. I wanted to play baseball, and during baseball season, I was allowed to go out for the team. But I couldn’t make it. I was too short and fat. That is why Michael, Mary Terese and I were the ones to work.

It was a natural progression, I being a butcher. I liked it, so one day, Pop says, “Hey. Come here,” and hung an apron on me and says, “There you are. Go to work.” I cut meat backwards. Well, I’m right-handed. So I cut from the left side of the meat. ‘Cause when I started, that’s all I could see. I couldn’t see the other side. I was too short. (laughter) So I had to cut on the side I could see. And that’s the way I did it. I
got good at it, and then when the war came along and Michael was gone. Francis was
gone. John was gone. So I did it. When Jimmy bought the store from us, on Saturdays,
he’d come and knock on the door. I had to go over there and cut steaks for certain people.
They didn’t want it from him. He didn’t do it good. He wasn’t a good enough butcher.
So I used to cut meat, cut the steaks up for the people I still liked.

Sure the business was successful. I would say we were middle class. We never
went hungry, but we never had a lot of money.

The City Market was mostly Italians. I worked there one summer for Aunt Emily.
Made fifty cents a week. I worked Saturdays. She said, “I’ll give you fifty cents.” So I
worked all day for fifty cents. I sold lettuce and celery and beans and peas and whatever
they wanted me to. She got her produce at the same place we got it for the store. At the
wholesale house. Everybody bought at the wholesale house and brought it back to the
City Market and had stands. You could rent any number of feet that you wanted. And
people come along, and you try to get ‘em to buy your stuff. It was fun.

Joan

Pleasantview Market. On Pleasant Street. It wasn’t really a very big store. It had
a wooden floor. It was your basic neighborhood grocery store. But my dad was such a
wonderful butcher, and we had such good meat, that people used to come from all over
the city to our grocery store to buy meat. It was attached to the house where we grew up,
which was not the house I was born in. But when they bought the grocery store, they
bought the house, too. It had been my grandmother and grandfather’s house. They both
died either before or the year I was born. So I don’t know when we moved out of the
one house and into that one. When they died, and the house and the grocery store was
left to all of them, my mother bought it from the rest of the brothers and sisters. Bought
their interest out. No, I’m not certain. This is an assumption on my part.

All my father did was cut the meat. He did not wait on customers. Very seldom
waited on a customer. Unless he had to go in and do something special for someone,
though. All he did was open the store in the morning and cut the meat and then by the
time he was ready to leave, my mother would be there. And she would be there the rest
of the day or someone else would stay while she went off to the market and the wholesale
house. Probably one of my older brothers. Michael, Francis, maybe Mary Terese when
she got older. I don’t know if Mother ever had any hired help in the store. I have no
idea about that. She didn’t when I was growing up. We were the hired help.

We were in a rather middle class neighborhood. I suppose we were middle class.
I assume the grocery store was profitable. We never wanted for anything that I’m aware
of. We didn’t have the newest clothes, but I don’t know if anybody wore clothes, got
new clothes. My mother went on two shopping trips a year down to Younkers. She
would come home with clothes for everyone. I mean, from your underwear out...shoes,
stockings, underwear, hats, coats. She would basically do this twice a year.

You had to go up three or four steps to get into the store. There was a center
island where the cash register and someone would sit behind it to take money from
people. There was an open cooler for fruits and vegetables on the left as you came in the
door. And the canned goods were on the right. And there was an ice cream cooler where
we sold ice cream. We sold ice cream cones at one time, and bars. I don’t think you
could buy much more than a pint. They didn’t have half-gallons or gallons. The meat
department was towards the back. We used to sell lunch meat and cheese. Which was
always bulk. There was nothing pre-packaged. All the lunch meat was cut fresh. My
father would open the store at five in the morning and cut all the meat for the day. He
would pretty well know what we would sell. If we would run out, he would come back
later on and cut some more special for someone.

The store was generally closed about seven or eight o’clock. Probably one of the
boys watched the place when she was cooking. Or Mary Terese. Yeah. Dad might go in
in the evening if it wasn’t too busy or, but not very often that I can remember.

I got an allowance. And I got to go to the movies every week. I had a fun
childhood. I worked in the grocery store. When I was younger, I helped put up stock.
You know, cans, mark them with prices and put up stocks. I didn’t deal with customers ‘til I got a little bit older. All of a sudden, my mother started being open on Sundays. And I used to have to work on Sundays. I was in my teens. I hated it. But then on the other hand, I could listen to the radio. It wasn’t just music. It had a lot of stories... “Gangbuster,” and “Superman,” and “The Lone Ranger.” So I used to listen to the radio and read and hope that a customer wouldn’t come in and interrupt me. And they didn’t very often.

We used to live right down the street from Methodist and the Blank Children’s Hospital. And there would be a lot of people who would come in during the week and kind of bemoan the fact that we weren’t open on Sundays because they would be stuck without being somewhere close to get something to eat. And so my mother would stay open then, and people used to come down and buy a loaf of bread and some lunch meat, and they’d take it back while their children were sick or they had someone in what I suppose is now considered intensive care. And so we were open on Sunday. I didn’t get paid. Although I probably could have taken money, because they never counted. All I had to do was ask. My father would have given me anything.

When I got older, Mom bought the house across the street and made it into apartments. It was called the Merrill Estate. It was an old and was empty for years and years and years. It used to belong to Governor Merrill, I think. It was a three-story old house, and there was a three-story barn. My mother had wanted to own this house for years and years; the estate would never sell it. Finally, for some reason, they decided she could buy it. We found old horseless carriages down in the barn. We found just a treasure trove of historical stuff. I don’t know what they did with them. I don’t think we just destroyed them. My mother converted the house into apartments. Beautiful curved stairway going up the stairs. It was just a wonderful old house. Michael lived in it for years. And Mary Terese had her first apartment there.

We also rented the apartments upstairs in our house. For a while, Aunt Laura lived upstairs when she was first married. But otherwise, it was rented out to mostly
single women. Once in a while, a couple. But mostly, single. Methodist Hospital was up the street, and most of the time they were nurses. They were nice apartments, the apartments upstairs of our house. We had the bottom floor, and the apartments were upstairs. It was my responsibility as I got older, I had to clean the upstairs. I had to keep the hallway and the bathroom upstairs. Yeah, for the tenants. Always had to dust. We didn’t have wall-to-wall carpeting, so I used to have to dust along the sides of the hall with a rug-runner. And I had to dust down the stairs. That was just part of the service.

I do have a very good business sense, I think. Um, I didn’t when I was younger. Simply because I didn’t need to. But when I had to work after I was married, I could. And that kind of took over our business, because I had to out of necessity. And then once I did, I enjoyed it. And I got better at it as I went along. I didn’t enjoy working with people; I enjoyed working in the office. I don’t like to deal with people. That’s why I hated the grocery store. I don’t like to deal with people.

Cristine

We still had the store when I was a little girl. I don’t know when they would have sold it. I was five when Mother got sick and I think they must have had it even then. But they must have sold it soon after she either got sick or died, ‘cause I do remember the other people had it. But I do remember when they still had it.

I remember what it was like. The check-out was kind of in the middle, and you walked in the front door which was in the middle. On the left hand side, was the produce-type place. In the very back of the store, there was a long meat counter, display case which you put the meat in to keep it cool. Behind that was a butcher’s block and behind that was even another tiny little room attached to the back. My dad was the butcher. The rest of it around the corner and up the other side was canned goods. It was very tiny, only a little corner grocery store. It was not a corner actually. It was on the corner of an alley.

As far as I knew, I don’t think Mom cut meat. Although I have a vague memory
of someone slicing off the top of their thumb, and I don’t remember who it was. It could have even been me. But it must have been either her or my dad. So, I don’t know if she ever cut the meat. I supposed she would have kept everything else going. She obviously went to the market and bought the produce from the wholesale place. No one else worked there. Not that I know of, but I have heard my brother Michael talk about working there while he was growing up.

As her son John said, a grocery store was a very clever way to support a family during the Depression and pre-World War II years. Lena Porti was good at it. Her ability to form reciprocal relationships with different members in the community to the betterment of her family’s economic condition is what stands out the most in this chapter. In fact, “relationship” is the term that is used by her children to describe the social ties she held with the woman who ran the KRNT theater, the nuns at the school, the nurses done the street and the men at the wholesale houses. It makes me wonder if the situation was not described to them using that type of language. Lena was the business person in the family and she seemed to enjoy the work. I discovered when I read her will that all the property -- the grocery store, the house and the apartments across the street -- was in her name at the time of her death. Even though the grocery store had the name of her husband on the window, it belonged to her along with everything else in the home. One more factor that completely lays to rest any idea that this family was male-dominated.
REVELATION, EDUCATION AND UPBRINGING

"We were cradle Catholics. They just sent us to Catholic schools. It was expected..."

The relationship between the Italians and the Church was unlike that of the Irish, Polish and other Slavic immigrants (McBride 1981; Johnson 1985; Vecoli 1981). The Italians in the United States were not, for the most part, church-centered enclaves. Based on their experiences in the old country, the Church was a wealthy, distant landlord and feared authority figure to the villagers. Italian males only went to church for three reasons: baptisms, weddings and funerals. The immigrants' attendance at church activities, including Mass, was not regular. Their children, however, were raised to be devout Catholics. Based on the Des Moines interviews, this enculturation to Catholicism, occurred not through their parents, but due to their enrollment in the different Catholic grade schools in the city. Ninety-seven percent of second generation Italian Americans in Des Moines claim to be Catholic. Of that group, 82% of them attend Mass regularly.

For the most part, Italian parents saw that a college education was a good way for their children to get ahead. If money was limited, the boys were going to go to college before the girls were. Gambino (1974) suggests that college and achievements were encouraged as long as they went along with family goals. Italian parents dislike excessive parental pressures for achievement feeling strongly that motivation should come from the child (Johnson 1985). Thirty-four percent of the second generation Italian Americans in Des Moines attended some schooling beyond high school.
Michael

I started school in kindergarten at age five. I went to St. John’s, K through 8th grade. I went to Dowling for high school. I walked to school every morning. From either house, it was about a mile. At first, by myself. Later, I picked up a buddy. Then when I was in high school, I used to walk with Mike L. Just Mike L. That was before we moved. So that was just my freshman year. Walked to school every day with him. We did our homework together. And then we moved, and that broke that up.

Yeah, these were parochial schools. I’d say forty or forty-five in a class. Sit at our desk for six hours. Doing the typical stuff, reading, writing, and arithmetic, mostly. Religion. Geometry. In grammar school, I remember getting in a fight one day. Got whooped. (Chuckle) Yeah. He was a lot bigger than me. Probably 5th grade.

On the playground, we played catch mostly. Keep away. Keep away was a big game. Draw sides and then play keep away with a tennis ball. I played marbles in grade school. Quit in 6th grade. Vanquished all the opposition. (chuckle) The 7th and 8th graders, I destroyed ‘em. I won all the marbles. You draw a ring and then each guy that’s in the game puts in a certain number of marbles, like five of ‘em. You got three guys so there would be fifteen marbles. Who ever got closest to the line goes first. I was so good that I got to shoot first. They’d make me shoot my first shot if I stuck. Stuck means that you knock a marble out without knocking yourself out of the ring. You get to take another shot. Well, if I shot and stuck, I got to get another shot. You got to knock the ball out of the ring. So you stuck, then all of a sudden, you were right on top of the marbles in the middle. I was shooting at ‘em from point blank range. I just give ‘em the rest of them as soon as the game started. It’s easy, huh? Well, at that time of my life, marbles were the only thing.

I can still remember going down to the drugstore by St. John’s school and buying my first package of marbles. Probably ten in there. That’s all I ever bought. I had a five gallon crock full. Of all the kids’ marbles. A bag of marbles cost only a nickel. I played my cousin Frank. Who was probably 3 years older than I. The parochial schools couldn’t
play in the city-wide marble tournament. He was in that because they went to the public schools. He was the best from his school. So word got around that I was pretty good. And he thought he was pretty good. So we had a match. And I whipped him. (chuckle)

I was a great student. I was the smartest boy in the class. 'Cause I had the best grades. I liked all of the subjects. There was just one I disliked and that would be English. Children were much more disciplined when I was a kid. I played hookey once that I remember. The Des Moines River was flooding, and we wanted to go and see it. Me and John D. Other than that, we were always in school. We would hardly ever miss a day of school.

My fondest memory of school was playing on the baseball team. Left field. I was only average. We used to have a round robin and played each school twice. We came in 2nd the year I played. For a kid, that was great stuff. Playing ball. It's a big deal when you're a kid. Baseball was it. I was a Yankees fan. The only sport that was pursued by the school as a whole. We did have a rag-tag football team. We didn't even indulge in basketball. That started after I left.

My fondest memory of high school was winning the math championship up in Ames. Our professor entered us. It used to be a big deal, too. Every spring. It was put on for VEISHA. They used to have competition in several subjects. I was a sophomore, and I competed in algebra. We competed independently. We got a black heart. I still got it.

When I graduated from high school in 1938, I had a scholarship to Iowa State. Courtesy of the Stemmi d'Italia. I even went up there and enrolled. But it scared the shit out of me. So I didn’t get past the first day. I was just lost up there. I knew nobody. The campus is spread out, you know. I had to go some place to drop off some papers. And then they said, “Here, you take this and you got to go get a physical.” It was just too much. (laughter) I got the scholarship because I had the best grades of any Italian in the city. Had a big banquet downtown. I got the award somewhere around here. Some girl from Ankeny got it, too. For that year.
Did my mother want me to go? Well, yes and no. When I got home that day, she said, "If you don’t want to go, you don’t want to go." She was dying to get the help in the store. That wasn’t a big deal back then. It was the exception rather than the rule, going to college. It was all changing about the time I was there. Year or two later, my brother Francis had a football scholarship to Creighton. But the girls, well, usually, there was no way they were going. Although some of them did. I think my parents wanted us to go to high school, but other than that, they didn’t care. Although they had two of them, Johnny and Francis, both went to college. One’s a doctor; one is a dentist.

It was on the nuns’ insistence that we went to Mass every week. The nuns had a bigger impact on it than our parents. Mother and father didn’t go to Mass very much. Usually, I used to take the younger ones when I was older. My mother did go to Mass. My father, not at all. He had some cockamamie story about crooked priests in Italy. I don’t know how he can verify much because he come over when he was a little kid.

While we were at Mass, he was over at the store. He didn’t discourage us from going. It was immaterial. Didn’t say either way. However, he was always punctual about waking me up Christmas morning for the five o’clock Mass, or Midnight Mass. And whenever I had to serve Mass, we all did that, He’d always wake me up for that. He did go to church for weddings and funerals.

I don’t think my attitude toward the Church has changed much. I will miss Mass once in a while now. My mother liked the priests. I think she had a positive attitude. I think that is the best way to put it. She was big buddies with Monsignor Lyon down at the Cathedral. And she used to sell stuff at bargain rates to the nuns at the commons while we were going to school. She wasn’t excessively religious, no. She had a rosary and she sent us all to the Catholic school, kindergarten through high school.

Francis

My parents’ attitudes toward education was blasé. They didn’t care if I went or I didn’t. I went to school a year late. I repeated kindergarten at St. John’s. My mom took
me over to enroll me and they asked if they wanted me to start in first grade or kindergarten. I said kindergarten. Start at the beginning. I made that decision. My birthday is in December, so I suppose it was right. Went to St. John’s probably through 8th grade. Kindergarten through 8th grade.

I walked to school. It was only a few blocks. I went with Michael. Michael started before I did. Mary went with me when Michael left. I suppose it was a mile. My classes size were about twenty students. It wasn’t real big. They taught us through memorization always. All nuns. We did not have any teachers that weren’t nuns. We used to have a principal who was very partial to boys. Couldn’t stand girls. If you were a boy at St. John’s, you had it made. She was a tough old nut, too. She wouldn’t let us get away with anything, but I think she had more respect for boys than for girls. Anyway, girls were not her favorite. Ain’t that weird?

I remember all the nuns well. Oh, yeah. You better believe they were strict. You better believe they hit us. (laughter) They used to swing for homeruns every time. But I was very well behaved. I was a good kid. I remember telling a lie in 2nd grade. And the nun washed my tongue out with soap. I remember that. I don’t remember what lie I told. I did tell a lie. And I knew it. And she put a bar of soap in my mouth, yeah. I told you that my mother used to punish us for what she didn’t know about. That was one of ‘em. (laughter) She used to punish us for what she didn’t know about.

You know, I was always real interested in art. And we did not have any art classes in parochial schools, so I was drawn to nothing in particular. But I was a good student. Particularly didn’t care for math. I was very good at drawing. So was my brother John, but he never followed up. Oh, he used to do beautiful art work.

I remember when I was a kid, our customers used to charge their groceries to little grocery stores. They didn’t pay cash like the big ones. Anyway, my dad had this customer that was a Frenchman, from France, who was also an artist. And my dad knew I was pretty good at art. So to pay this guy’s bill, he’d exchange it for art lessons for me. That was nice. Yeah, my dad was like that. I learned quite a little bit from that guy.
The only problem was most of the time I’d go over there, he was drunk. I learned things like perspectives and how to draw heads and portraits.

That’s what attracted me about dentistry. I had visited a dental school. They had to do tooth carvings out of plaster, etc. And that kind of intrigued me. Most of my children have talent. But, you know, there’s a certain amount of, I know it’s a science, but there’s a lot of art involved in dentistry. Actually, when you think about it.

I was always real interested in athletics. I used to live for that. And playing those games was always the best time. My most disappointing times is when I would be playing ball, and the time would pass and my dad would come to pick me up for work at the store, so I had to leave to go home. I used to see that car drive up and thought, “Oh God, here we go.” Oh, my passion was athletics. I always wanted to be an athlete. I probably played golf the best. Then baseball. I played basketball. I played ‘em all. I got a scholarship at Creighton in football. I guess I was good. I don’t like to brag.

My mother used to have the football team over. Those guys can still remember those dinners at my house. My sisters used to love it ‘cause I’d bring all these good-looking guys over. (laughter) Oh, I bet you my mother did that maybe once a month. During football season. My mother enjoyed it. My mother loved to cook. And she was good at it. And she could cook other things, other than Italian foods, too.

We used to watch movies a lot. When we lived on Harding Road, we used to walk downtown, which was fairly three miles. I can remember Michael and Mary Terese and I walking down before we could even read. I remember that because they were silent movies. The words would come on the screen, and I remember asking my cousin what it said. I couldn’t figure it out. (laughter)

I read a lot, too. But John used to bring all the books into the house. We had a neighbor up the street, by the name of Van Dyke. And they were quite educated people, and there were all kinds of books in their house. And she used to loan me these books. You know, like the Hardy Boys, Tarzan, and The Last of the Mohicans, and all those. I read those books. Mysteries. I love mysteries. I like mysteries, because you do a lot of
mental gymnastics trying to figure out who did what. Looking for clues all the time. Yeah, I like plays, too. I don’t like to read ‘em, I like to see ‘em. With the possible exception of maybe the Shakespeare stuff. I like prose, you know. I love those, the way they say things. Especially the Shakespeare stuff.

Music played an important part around the house for Michael. Oh, Michael was a freak for music. Classical music. Light opera. That sort of thing. We never had a record player; he listened to the radio. My mother did not care for music. Although my mother did like the light opera plays down at the KRNT theater, they called it. It was just down the hill from us on Pleasant Street, what, three or four blocks. And she used to have what she called a friendship with the lady that managed it. And this lady would get her tickets to all these plays down there in the front row. And so, once a while, she’d take one of us with her. But she used to go to all of ‘em. My dad never went. We’d get to go if we were good boys. The one I remember most is “Porgy and Bess.” I remember that one probably more than any of them.

Church was very important. My mother always went to church. But, she wasn’t religious. As a matter of fact, we used to have some friends who were very religious, and she never could understand how they could get that deeply into it. That was always kind of my attitude, too.

My dad saw that we went to church, but he never went to church. Very insistent that we go, though. It was a different time. You did what you were told and often didn’t question it, either. My dad had what he considered a realistic attitude towards priests. He had grown up when priests in Italy, are not that well considered. And so, apparently, the priest that he was acquainted with was kind of corrupt. He used to make them pay if he gave them communion. You paid for it, if he said a Mass. Which they still do, but this guy was pretty flagrant about it. I think I probably told you when my dad was dying, and they brought him communion, he got into his wallet and wanted to pay the guy. Toward the end. Yep. Well, he was figuring a priest is a priest. That’s the priest he knew, so he was gonna pay. Churchmen where he grew up must have been really corrupt.
Mary Terese

I went to Kindergarten at St. John’s. You know back then when you went to kindergarten, it was really a waste of time. You mostly made things and drew things and colored. At school, we used to play games, hide-and-go-seek, or play jacks, or things like that. I can remember some of the nuns we had. I can always remember Sister Mary L. She was about “that” big and somebody started the rumor I’m sure, that she had a special tunic made for her ‘cuz she was so big (laughter). Do you know what the BVMs dressed like? Do you remember their habits? There was kind of this square thing and then they had this thing around here their necks. We were always trying to get a peak in the back where there was always a little space because we always wondered what their hair looked like.

Sister Mary L talked like a man. She had a deep voice. When we’d walk in school or out of school at St. John’s, we always walked in twos and they always played march music, you know, “dum-dum-da-dum-dum.” You had to walk in twos, could not talk, before and after. I remember one time, Eugene was in front of Francis and he was always ornery. He was talking, and Sister come up and swung at him. He ducked so she hit Francis right in the face. (laughter) Boy, she was mean. Later at St. Joseph’s Academy, she was kinda sort of retired but they let her work in the supply room. In these days, you bought all your supplies from whatever school you were in. She’d gotten kind of old and couldn’t see very good, and the girls used to steal from her. They even sold candy in this supply room. I always felt sorry for her. They took advantage of her, some of the girls did.

I was finishing seventh grade when we moved to Pleasant Street. But all of us finished at St. John’s. Why they let us do it, I don’t know. When we lived on 21st Street, I’d say we were maybe five blocks from school. So we walked to school. When we were on Pleasant Street, it was a long walk, and, we were supposed to walk. Michael always thought we should walk, but once in a while, I could talk my mother into giving me fifty cents. For fifty cents you could buy a book of tickets for the street cars. So, I
rode the streetcar but never when Michael was around. We always rode our bikes when the weather was nice.

I was very good in spelling and I used to win a lot of prizes for that. Little holy cards or medals. That was a big deal. The only thing I really didn’t like was math. It was hard for me. When I went to high school and took geometry and algebra, I just flipped out. I don’t know how I passed it, really.

St. Joseph’s was a private Catholic school, in those day a boarding school for the girls that lived out of town. There were also a couple of girls whose mothers had died who boarded there. It was just completely run by nuns. When I graduated from St. Joe’s, and it was considered a BIG class, there was seventy-five in our class. Now they have what one, two maybe three hundred in a class. I graduated in 1941.

It never occurred to us girls to ask to go to college. When I finished school, I signed up to be a nurse. A friend and I went and signed up at Mercy School of Nursing, and we were supposed to start in the fall that year. Michael didn’t want me to. Wouldn’t let me do it. He told me I had to stay home and help in the store. So my friend went to nursing school; I went to work in the store.

My mother was a big reader. Our family’s been a big reading family. I used to go to the library and get a lot of books. My friends and I loved to buy those love story magazines. They had these pretty pictures, black and white pictures of girls, and we’d color ‘em and fill ‘em in. We’d just do that by the hour.

I had to take my younger sisters to the movie. Joanne mostly. We usually all went together and even sometimes we went with Aunt Emma’s kids. They lived about six blocks from us. There’d be a bunch of us, our cousins and us, and we’d walk downtown to the movie. Almost every time we did that, a bunch of colored kids would try to take our money away from us. My cousin Frankie was a big guy and they were scared of him. He had to fight ‘em off. The one time my mother beat the heck out of me for coming home so late, I had gone by myself to the movie. That was probably what she was mad about. Well, in those days, we weren’t scared of anything. We never locked our doors.
We weren’t afraid. I was never afraid to walk anywhere at night.

I was just an average student. My brothers were always smarter than I was. They were just smarter! If we got in trouble at school, there was bigger trouble when we got home. The nuns were always right. But really, I was too bashful to get in trouble.

I loved high school! We used to have a lot of fun! We used to do an operetta every year. I was always in the chorus or something. Just certain girls played the parts of the men, we were at a girls school. Later Dowling and St Joe’s had their plays together. I used to help make the costumes and the scenery and all that.

When I was in St John’s, I took piano lessons. I was pretty good. Michael and I took lessons. We had a piano at home. I used to have to practice a lot. After I left St. John’s, I never played again. I don’t know if my parents encouraged us. But you know, the nuns would talk to the parents, “Why don’t you have Mary Terese take piano lessons,” and so my mother let us. It was very cheap then, you know.

My mother loved to dance. They’d roll up the rugs and they had three little old Italian men who played music. One of them played the mandolin, one the guitar and the last one played the triangle. Mom used to make me dance with those goofy old Italian men. I used to hate it. My mother liked music, but she wasn’t musically inclined. I think at one time, my father knew how to play the mandolin. I just vaguely remember it, when I was young, that there was one around.

Oh, they wanted us to go to school up to high school. Mom thought the boys should have a college education, but never the girls. Michael, he went into the service, so he didn’t get to go. I don’t know that he wanted to go to college. There was never any question that Francis was going to college. He had a football scholarship at Creighton. Now that I look back on it, I think Michael was a little envious of Francis. I think he thought Francis got more things than he did. I suppose looking back on it, I would say that Michael was right. Yeah, just like me. There was no question of going to college. Girls don’t go to college. But I did work.

I think maybe my mother finished 6th grade. My dad, back in the old country, I
don’t even know if he went to school. He could, he could write, I mean, he was a terrible
writer, but he could read English, a lot of the old Italian people that come over here
couldn’t read or write. He could also read Italian. Well I suppose back in those days
when they were young, it wasn’t important to people that they have you know an
education like that I guess. They learned more in 6th grade than we did in twelve years.

It was absolutely important to go to Mass every week. When I was at St. John’s,
sometimes we had to go everyday. My mother went to church. We had no choice. We
had to go to nine-fifteen Mass every Sunday morning. If we didn’t go, they would know
it and we would really be in trouble. Seems to me that we had to all meet downstairs or
something at the Church. And you better have a heck of a good excuse if you didn’t
show up for nine-fifteen Mass. I’m talking about the nuns, not my parents. Yes! The
nuns met us. The nuns made certain we got to Mass.

I remember my mother and I we used to go together to Mass during Lent. We
used to walk down to St. Ambrose every morning to go to Mass. Just my mother went to
church. Dad didn’t go because he said that the priests over in Italy didn’t practice what
they preached. That is the way he put it. The priest said, “Do as I say, not as I do.” But
he always stressed that we always had to go to Mass. He didn’t eat meat on Fridays.

I wouldn’t say that I was overly religious. I believe in everything the Church says.
I can’t go to Mass like I did. Before I was sick. I never did miss Mass. Oh, my God
no, my conscience would bother me. But I go to Mass every morning at seven o’clock on
T.V. on the Vision Channel. Well, it is just like going to Mass and then Sam goes to
Mass and brings Communion home to me.

John

I don’t think they had kindergartens in those days. The school I went to was St.
John’s. That was a parochial school and it was about maybe five or six blocks from
where we lived at that time. I used to walk to school. I can remember the school, the
nuns, the classrooms, and the whole situation quite well.
In those days, everybody walked to school. You didn’t think twice about it. There might have been other kids in the neighborhood that I would walk with. After we moved to the store, it was quite a further distance to St. John’s. I wanted to continue going to school there because I liked it. We had actually moved into another district and I shouldn’t have been going back to St. John’s. But I did. We could catch the bus but I’d usually walk it. There was a short way to walk which went through the Negro section which always made me sort of uneasy. There was a long way around and I would usually take the long way around but sometimes I would cut through the Negro section.

I like the musicals. My mother went to see a number of those. I can remember seeing Oklahoma. That’s the only one I really remember. There was no music right around the house. I don’t know whether that was because no one was musically inclined. I’ll take that back. There was a piano. My sister took piano lessons, I think. Mary Terese. I think she was the only one that took piano lessons. Otherwise, no one was musically inclined. Oh, I think my sister when she was in high school got into the records and the popular songs. She had a few friends who were into it, but I don’t recall anyone else actually doing much with music. I don’t think there is any musical talent in our family.

There was probably thirty to forty students in our classes. When the nuns taught, there were no disciplinary problems. Schools were much more structured then. Much more disciplined. All the way around. I don’t know if Catholic schools are still like that. They were very structured in reading, writing and arithmetic, religion. A lot of physical discipline in high school. They wouldn’t hesitate to hit somebody if they got out of line. Unheard of nowadays. The subjects were pretty much down to earth. And I can remember some of the slower kids in school who obviously weren’t going to make it very far. No attempt was made to pamper them or anything. They’d either get it or they didn’t and they fell behind. They might fall into a grade back of them or they might just quit school. They mostly used the blackboard. Learn your sums up there and taking turns standing up and reading. This was in grade school. In high school, you had your choice.
of classes. I don’t know why, but I always took the hardest classes I could find. I don’t know why. Four years of Latin. I took the hardest classes I could find. Otherwise, it was very boring in school.

Dowling was a boys’ school. I think there were between three and four hundred boys there. They also had junior college for two years. But that went out of existence fairly quickly. Dowling was considered pretty elite. You go to this Catholic boys school, whereas just about anybody else went to the public schools. There was intense competition. We were much smaller than the public high schools but we were always able to compete with them in sports and things like that.

My brother Frank graduated from high school the year before I entered. He had a big reputation in high school. It sort of put the pressure on me to...and I couldn’t do this athletically. I couldn’t live up to him athletically. He was very talented. I think that’s one reason I tried to do it as a student, which I found very easy. I was a good student. Well, for one thing I learned to read at a very young age and learned to read books. And I could always remember, even when I was a tiny little boy, going to the City Library. It was down by the market and when my mother would go down and she would drop me at the Library to get books. At an early age, I was reading voraciously just everything. I can remember in grade school one of the nuns coming out one recess and asked me why I didn’t get up and pray. I was reading a book and she wanted to know why I didn’t get up and pray with the other kids. And I just wanted to sit and read my book. So I think that I learned to read very quickly which helps you to be a good student.

I also quickly realized that in order to get good grades, you had to figure out the professor. It really didn’t matter what you learned in the class, although I was pretty curious and I liked to learn things. But even if I didn’t like the subject, something like history, I found this game of figuring out my professor and finding out how to figure what he was going to ask on the test. It was a little game with the professor as far as getting a good grade was concerned. I found it very easy and very entertaining to get into that. And I was very successful at that.
Well, I'd read anything. But mostly adventure stories, that stuff. But I quickly got into books way beyond my age level. I remember I didn't last long in the kid section of the public library. I was quickly into the adult section. I don't recall my mother overtly encouraging it but I am certain I wasn't discouraged. My parents were able to read but they didn't. I was the one that always went to the Library and bring home the books. Michael was a pretty good reader and he'd read my books. Mary Terese would read some of my books. But I was always the one that went and got them. Every few days, I'd be back at the Library.

I liked mathematics best. I think I liked the pure reasoning of it. There's a right and a wrong. It's entirely objective. So you knew when you had it right. You got the right answer, that was it.

When I was in high school, I quickly got the reputation of being quite a good student. All I had to do was sign up for class and they figured I was going to get an "A" which made it a lot easier to get an "A" than a poor student who came in and did the same work probably wouldn't get an "A". So I was getting a lot of recognition for it and I quickly became aligned with a group who were good students but also very venturesome. They were athletes but typical people who ran the high school, athletes, good students. And we were also very venturesome. We'd play hookey. We'd take off just to see if we could get away with it. And we usually could. We'd also create havoc in the classrooms, you know, like making noises. It made life miserable for the teacher.

In high school, the priests were very cognitive that they had a bunch of teen age boys and that they had to keep pretty strict discipline. They didn't hesitate to hit you if they had to. I received my fair share. Only they recognized that I was pretty bright but they also recognized that I had to be kept under control. When I graduated from high school, I was at the top of my class and I was president of the senior class. At graduation, the priest told me that I couldn't graduate first in my class because he had caught a bunch of us skipping school the week before graduation or something. It didn't bother me at all. I didn't care if I was first in the class.
I don’t think actually any of the shenanigans were that serious that it got back to my parents. Except one occasion, when a group of my buddies went after a bunch of students from the Ankeny high school. They had beaten up a few Des Moines kids and so we were going to get them. It was kind of like a modern gang, only it was pretty childlike. We didn’t have any weapons or anything. We all gather this one night and there was probably a little beer drinking. I didn’t really indulge in that, but my friends did. Ultimately we ended up driving out to Ankeny and vandalizing a few places along the way. It was a real mob scene. This didn’t go unnoticed by the authorities who thoroughly investigated it. The next day a couple of plain clothes detectives came to my house. They had gotten my name as having been in on it. They wanted to talk to me. I remember my mother being there and she never really said anything about that. They took me down to the police station and they questioned me for a couple of hours. It sort of frightened me, you know. Actually, one of them knew my uncles and gave me a real talking to and made me feel real bad that I had been involved in all of this. They wanted to get other names out of me, you see. I told them what I knew. When I went home, my mother never asked me anything about it. I was really surprised. That’s about the only serious problem I really got into in high school.

Remember I was telling you about sneaking out the window of my bedroom. One time I did that, I got a call in the late evening from one of the members of that gang. He was from one of the more affluent families on the West side of town. His father and mother were gone and he’d decided he would take the family car. I don’t think he got permission for this. He took the family car that evening and was out with a couple of friends from over there and he was in some kind of scrape and ran the car into the curb and busted a tire. He didn’t want his dad to find out about this so he wanted me to help him find a new tire.

This was getting along past my bedtime, you know. So I went to bed, lights out and everything, and then out the window I went, and he picked me up. We were out all night trying to fix his tire. We didn’t have any money. We had to steal a tire. But he
insisted that it had to be the same make and size and everything so his father wouldn’t notice it. So I remember we went to the hospital down the street from my house and checked all the parked cars. Dawn was breaking when we finally found a car. We jacked up the car, took the tire off, and off we went. That’s about the worst thing I ever did, I think.

Well, one other thing. The fellow that did this was a little more sophisticated than the rest of us really. He had a girlfriend. We didn’t have girlfriends in high school. But he had a girlfriend and he got her pregnant. It was much admired because the rest of us were all very virginal. I remember him telling us that he was in bad trouble because Kathy was pregnant. He told us this at lunch one day. Either juniors or seniors in high school. He told us about this and we were all kinda bug-eyed, you know. She was going to have an abortion but he had to scrape up enough money to pay for it. And so we all dug down deep and scraped up what money we had to loan to him so he could get out of the jam. I was the class treasurer and I had thirty-five dollars in the bank account for the class. I loaned him this thirty-five dollars and he said he’d pay me back and he did pay me back. Abortion back in those days was illegal. But I don’t think it was difficult at all. I don’t know who did them or any of the details. I don’t know that I made any judgements about it. I was glad it wasn’t me. Sort of beyond me. It didn’t strike us as being wrong. We knew we better not get caught or it would be trouble.

When I was a senior in high school, spring of ’44, the draft was still in effect. As soon as you got out of high school, you were going to get drafted. Everybody knew this. At that point they were having examinations, countrywide examinations. These tests were given in all the high schools and the best students were allowed then to go to college, in the military, with the idea that they would in a year or two go to officers training school, which was college with officers preparatory course. I think all the kids in the country took them and I was one of them. I was selected and I was sent to Ames and put into first year engineering. It was very intensified, very competitive and it was very rough. I graduated in May and the first of June, I was in Ames and stayed there for three
semesters. Had a lot of success in school. It was a rough program and a lot of people didn’t keep up but I found it quite easy. It was all math and physics. If you didn’t keep up, they put you into general service.

The war ended in ‘45 and it became obvious that we weren’t going to complete this program. We had been in it a year, at which time we were supposed to go to officers training school. “Well,” they said, “we don’t need you as bad now so it will be two years of college before you go to officers training school.” I had really gotten involved in getting educated. I really enjoyed the classes and learning things. Mostly because I’d had a lot of success, I got a lot of recognition for this and realized I could do this better than most people. But I didn’t like Ames, Iowa, and I decided that I didn’t want to be in engineering.

I applied for a transfer and I was sent to the University of Miami in Ohio. And I was there for about two semesters and while I was there I was just in the Liberal Arts Program. My classmates down there were mostly pre-medical students. Everyone of them wanted to go to medical school and I sort of got mixed up with these pre-med students. I decided I’d really like to go to college. Medicine sounded like seven more years and that sounded great. That’s just the place for me. I didn’t want to graduate.

The military told us that if we wanted to continue in school, in this program, we had to sign up to stay for three or four years after we graduated. I opted to drop out. So they sent me to General Service for six months at San Francisco Bay. Went through boot camp. They didn’t really accomplish anything. So I was in for about six more months in general duty and then I got discharged. I continued with this pre-medicine program that I had started at the University of Iowa.

I didn’t have any money, but with a little help from home and the GI Bill, I went through the University of Iowa graduate school and applied for medical school. I really had no idea of what I was getting into. I didn’t know anybody in the medical profession. I didn’t know a nurse, let alone a physician. I just got into it because it was supposed to be difficult. I applied to Northwestern and Harvard because it was supposed to be
difficult to get accepted. I didn’t know anything about what I was doing. I got fifty
dollars a month on the GI Bill and they paid my tuition and I lived in a little room. That
was it. But anyway, I got accepted by all of them. Harvard wanted me to send $3500
tuition to hold my place. Northwestern was something about the same. So obviously, I
decided I’m not going to those. I was accepted at Iowa and the tuition was only ninety
dollars a semester.

I joined the Medical Fraternity and went to class. I remember the big class your
first year was anatomy. I remember anatomy, it was pretty shocking then. I remember
going to the first lecture on anatomy and the professor talking about some body part. I
didn’t know what he was talking about. It took me about two or three days. I wasn’t
about to ask anybody because I didn’t want to be stupid. It took me about two or three
days to realize that it was the medical term for the armpit.

I approached it with the idea that I can outwit this professor. I was quite
successful at it all through medical school. I really didn’t have an interest in medicine all
through medical school. In fact, I was sort of shocked by the body and the discipline
involved. They seemed determined to flunk out about half of the people there. It was
very hard work. For the first time in my life, I found that I really had to study. It was
very difficult. I never got interested in medicine until I graduated and went to my
internship and had to deal with patients, and that’s pretty scary. You realize you should
have been learning all this stuff and that they really don’t teach you much. I really took
to the internship and then I applied for residency. I worked hard at it. It was exciting,
very exciting. No more fooling with professors, you had to learn the stuff. Had to know
it. Had to be smart and use your head. And I got interested.

My parents knew less about college than I did. None of them had any experience
with college. The only one that had any experience was Frank. And Frank was pretty
strict. He wasn’t bright. But he got along in school. But he had to work at it and I used
to get advice from him about what I should be taking in math. But his situation was
different than mine. I was really on the good side of the school. But they didn’t know
anything about this. They didn’t have any idea. So I was off to college but what college
was, I might as well have been off to Mars. They didn’t have any idea. But on the other
hand, if I would not have had my education paid through the military, I think my mother
would have figured out how to pay for it. I’m sure I could have gotten a scholarship
somewhere. My whole family were all very proud. I think Frank was very approving of
the fact that I decided to go to medical school. He approved of that. The rest of them
were sort of in awe of the idea of going to college, something like going to medical
school was something they couldn’t relate to. It was my impression that my mother
didn’t have any education. I always thought that my mother must have gotten through
grade school.

I had very little supervision. I was lucky I didn’t get in bad trouble. As it turned
out, I think it was good. You know, if a kid is given the wrong supervision, you learned
alot if you didn’t get in bad trouble. This is a matter of luck. But I could easily have
gotten killed in a car accident, drowned in the river or something. I never really got in
any bad mischief. I think I got away with that more than my siblings did. I don’t think
Frank was near as venturesome as I. He probably could have done that, too, but he
wasn’t nearly as venturesome as I was. Frank was a pretty straight fellow. He started
going with Gen when he was in high school and married her. His life was pretty straight
and narrow and mine was more adventuresome. And Michael, I don’t think ever had the
opportunity. He had a lot more responsibility.

My mother was a pretty faithful Catholic. She never really beat us with it but she
made sure we all went to Mass. My dad had nothing to do with it. Going to church.
But he also emphasized that we go to church.

Christmas was the big holiday in our family. We had presents but by today’s
standards they were pretty meager. I can remember Christmas we always got, when I was
little, a couple of games. That was the big thing. That we could all play games. And we
children didn’t give gifts. This was something our parents would do for us. I know how
hard they had to scrape to do it. There was always a big argument about whether we
should open presents before Mass or not. It depended on when we decided to go to Mass. And it would be done in a group actually. We wouldn’t necessarily go to Mass as a group. But presents were a group activity. Sometime Christmas morning. Some of us may have gone to Mass already but we’d time it so that we were all there. The day before most of the cooking would be done, except making the sauce the same day.

I think gradually my mother switched over to the Cathedral. What church going we did was all at St. John’s. In first grade, I became an altar boy. I could learn the Latin very quickly. I expect I was the first one in the class to learn all the Latin and got to be the altar boy first. And being an altar boy was a big thing when I was in grade school. Up to the eighth grade. And it was quite a chore. You’d serve for a week at a time. You’d have to get up at five o’clock in the morning and go serve Mass at that early hour and school started about eight or so.

I don’t think we went to church as a family. I’m not sure we all went to church. We kids were supposed to go. And we would go. But it was more or less we went on our own. Maybe someone would go with my mother and maybe she’d go with one of her friends or she’d just go by herself. Religion really wasn’t important around the house at all. There were a few crucifixes around the house and maybe grace was said at the big Sunday dinner, maybe it wasn’t. I don’t remember it being overly religious. or stressed. I think Mom was fairly religious. I think she’d go to some of the functions like the stations of the cross, or something like that occasionally. She wasn’t overly religious, you know.

Catholic schools were considered much superior to the other schools. The other schools had a lot of kids in them that were trouble makers, undesirable kids. These were eliminated from the Catholic schools very quickly. I think the Catholic schools were considered better, which I think was very important to my mother. And also the religious factor. I think it was a combination of the two. The subject just never came up that we would go to anything other than the Catholic school.
Joey

I think I was five when I first went to school. I must have been four when I started. Maybe I was four because I was just barely sixteen when I graduated. I went to St. John’s and to Dowling. That’s it. I used to walk to school. By myself. Even when I was four or five, I would assume I did. It was five or six blocks. There were probably thirty to thirty-five kids in my class and we were taught by nuns. Yeah. BVMs. Sisters of Charity, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

You know discipline now and discipline then was so much different. We didn’t pull the stuff they do now. So there were no discipline problems. If they told you to be quiet in class, you were quiet. If not, why I don’t remember what they would do if you didn’t. We all had to wear uniforms. Everybody wore clothing alike, so there was no fighting over shoes or jackets. And if you didn’t wear your tie, why they’d put a paper one on you.

I was not a very good marble shooter. John was the champion marble shooter. John had a whole dresser drawer full of marbles. He cleaned every kid out in school at one time. I wasn’t very good at marbles.

Our school had two stories, four grades on the first floor and four on the second floor and kindergarten down in the basement. We used to put enough string on a yo-yo that we could run our yo-yo down from the second floor clear down to the ground. (chuckle) I remember doing that. Every day, if the weather was decent, we were playing baseball or football outside. In the wintertime, we went over to the gym which had a nine or eight foot ceiling and you couldn’t arch your ball very much, but we used to play basketball all the time.

I liked all the subjects. And I loved to read. We used to go to the library and get all the books they’d let us have. We’d pass ‘em around between us and probably read fourteen books a week. My parents didn’t read and didn’t encourage us to read. Not at all. Not that I can ever remember. We just did it because it was enjoyable. I liked to read early American fictional, early American history, early American settlement time,
Indians, French and Indian Wars and that era. I liked to read fiction back then. James Fenimore Cooper was one of my favorites. Anything that was interesting, I’d read it.

I don’t ever remember ever playing hooky. We might have skipped a class once in a while, but not a whole day. In high school, we might skip last period or something if we thought we could get away with it. But never took off a day. No, heavens, no.

When I was in grade school, we were all altar boys. And I was the soloist. I had the most beautiful soprano voice. I was a soloist in the altar boy choir. And when we used to sing the Mass at Christmas which is when I remember singing the most. What’s the name of the Christmas Carol I want? You know, where you have the fifteen glorias. That was my solo. I used to belt that out, they could hear it all over school when we’d practice. We practiced right outside of the 8th grade room. Whenever we would practice, the sisters would open the door, so they could hear us sing. Let the other kids hear us. That was a big deal.

Only had one fatal flaw. We were gonna sing at five o’clock Mass on Christmas morning when I was in 8th grade, and I got up at about four-fifteen, and the pipes just couldn’t get warmed up. And my voice started to crack and there were guys on the each side of me, Jack and Red. At about the 12th gloria, they would come in. And I had to poke ‘em to get ‘em started earlier to help me out. Then we all had to march the hall and clear down the hall and sat on the altar. Monsignor McNamara says, “You boys did a fine job, it’s just a shame that the soloist’s voice decided to crack today.” But I got through it all. It didn’t shatter me in any way, whatever. My parents were there, I’m pretty sure.

There wasn’t really any other music around the house. I think Mary Terese played the piano, whether she liked it or not. I don’t think Joanne ever took piano lessons.

Mom did have a relationship with the manager of the KRNT theater. She was a customer of the store. We used to deliver her groceries for her. And whenever there was anything going on down there, we could come down and see it. And we’d have seats, usually good seats. If the house was sold out, she would bring folding chairs in front of
the front row, right behind the orchestra pit, and we'd watch it from there. I saw, "Hell's a Poppin’", and some great orchestras came through. We saw all the Victor Herbert operettas, saw the original road cast of "Porgy and Bess." It was just anything. I loved it all. I loved it all. Loved it all. Those Victor Herbert operas were fascinating, "The Desert Prince" and the "Something Moon." "Porgy and Bess" was fantastic. I saw "Porgy and Bess" here a couple of months ago, wasn't near as good. But it has a lot to do with the acoustics of the theater, I think. Because the KRNT theater had perfect acoustics. You could be in the 3rd balcony and all they had to do was talk in normal voice on the stage, and you could hear 'em.

The other, most vivid memory I have of school is...I don’t remember what happened, but somebody hit me one day. And John damn near killed the kid. I don’t know whether I aggravated this guy or what. John was a year ahead of me, so I’m a nothing, the little guy and they’re the big guys. He just damn near killed that kid. Oh, yeah, Francis used to come to school, he was always very fastidious in his dress, and he used to comb his hair with lots of water to keep it down. He’d get to school in the wintertime, and his hair would be frozen. (chuckle) We used to kid him about that.

Mom used to go down to Hot Springs with Pop because the doctor told her it was good for ‘em. Once, when I was a junior in high school, they decided they were going to go for six weeks or so. My mom called up Dowling and told ‘em that she needed me at the store whenever I needed to be there, especially in the mornings and wanted to know if it was okay. They said, “Sure.” So for six weeks, I’d get up and open in the morning. Mary Terese and Joanne were involved, too. We would take care of the store. Sometimes, we didn’t go to school at all. Depended on whether I felt like it or not. I have no idea whether this was something that other people were doing, going down to the hot springs for medicinal reasons. I would assume so because it’s been done for it’s healthful waters. It still is, I guess.

If we wanted to go to college, we had to pay our way. I had an interest in it, but I went to Drake for one semester. At that time, all the good teachers were gone, and there
were a bunch of idiots there that didn’t do much for me. So after nine days, after I was
eighteen, which was in February of ‘46, I went down and took immediate induction in the
army and was drafted. Well, it was at the end of WWII, 1946. VJ day was in October of
‘45. I graduated in the end of May in ‘45. VJ day I think was that October. I was
eighteen the following February. And I went down on my birthday and signed up for the
draft. I wanted immediate induction. Nine days later I was in the army. The war was
over so I didn’t go overseas. That’s where I learned to do x-ray. Except for basic
training, I spent the rest of the time in San Antonio, Texas, taking x-rays.

How important was it to go to Mass every Sunday? We were cradle Catholics. It
was just like putting on your socks in the morning. We did it. Pop never went to church.
But he wouldn’t let us miss. And he always made us go to church before we could go
hunting or fishing. Mom always went. Michael and I would probably go to Mass
together. Maybe if John was going to go hunting with us, he’d go at the same time. We
didn’t go together as a family. They just sent us to Catholic school. That was expected.
Mother was really religious. I don’t remember pictures of saints, but she used to carry a
rosary with her most of the time.

Joan

I can remember my brother Michael took me to first grade. I went to the academy
for that pre-school for only a half a year. That was when I was four. You weren’t
supposed to start 1st grade until you were six. You were supposed to go to kindergarten.
My brother Michael brought me up to St. John’s and told the nuns that I was only five
but I was supposed to be in the 1st grade because I was too intelligent to go to
kindergarten. I went into 1st grade.

I liked grade school. Because, there was a fire at St. John’s. And we had to have
school in the basement of the church which was a huge assembly hall with a kitchen.
They used to have wedding receptions down there. The whole school was set up there
with no partitions. It was like the old-fashioned one-room school house. Everyone had
their separate teachers and everything, but we were all together there in the basement. Ate there. I don’t remember how long it lasted until the school was fixed.

The first Friday of every month, everyone was supposed to go to Mass and communion. Of course, we went to Mass every day. Afterwards, the entire school was served cocoa and cinnamon, homemade cinnamon rolls in the basement of the church after communion. I can remember a lot of assemblies where they showed us movies. They were always religious movies, but they were movies. We used to put on school plays. Where the entire school would participate in some part.

I attended St. Joseph’s for high school. At that time, St. Joseph’s was all-girls. There were boarders. It was usually for girls from out of town. I got to school on the streetcar. It used to take me a good hour to get to school.

When I was growing up, you had to get permission for a Catholic to go to a public school. You just didn’t send your child to a public school. That was just the way it was. There were probably forty to forty-five children roughly per class. We had arithmetic and English and geography and what they used to call hygiene. There wasn’t any fooling around, and there was no hesitation to flunk somebody. But they also went out of their way to try and help somebody if they were having trouble. There was no thought to holding somebody back if they didn’t make the grade. We also had excellent PE classes where we learned how to do square-dancing and polka-dancing. In addition to all the other baseball and basketball, the Catholic grade schools in Des Moines had quite an intramural, for boys and girls. Girls basketball, girls softball. We had our own intramural tournaments.

I was not very good in sports, although I played softball some at school. I was more interested in the cultural things. I took piano lessons from the time I was in 4th grade until I was in 8th grade. Every year all the music students of all the schools of Des Moines would get to go down to the KRNT Theater. It was a legitimate theater. We got to hear a classical musical concert by a symphony orchestra. I was good at the piano but I did not have a natural talent. I had to work very hard, but when I learned a piece, I did
it very well. I was always in a recital. I played the organ for the church. Everyday. Well, there was two or three of us, a group of us who would take turns during the week and on Sunday, too. That was probably 7th and 8th grade. We had the old-fashioned kind where somebody had to pump the organ. I can remember my brother Michael was so thrilled that I played the organ, that he came once and pumped the organ just so he could be there when I played. Mary Terese took piano lessons, too. She had a more natural talent than I did.

We used to sing around the piano. There was always music around. Records were always going. Most of it was classical, though. I grew up listening to classical music and learning how to play the piano. And that’s why when those of my daughters who did take piano, I’d rather had them learn classical music as a basis. ‘Cause I think if you can play classical music, you can play any kind. But I know, knew a lot of people who could only play pop music, who could not play classical music.

My mother was very cultural-minded. My father told me that he used to play the mandolin. But I never heard him. Mom couldn’t carry a tune. But she loved to hear good music. Like I said, she was very cultural-minded. She used to cook spaghetti dinners for a lady who ran the Shrine Auditorium, or KRNT. At the time, it was the largest cultural legitimate theater in the world. It seated over two thousand. She was close friends with the woman who ran it. If the lady had guests that she really wanted to impress, my mother would cook a spaghetti dinner for them. Consequently, we got into everything that came to the Shrine theater free of charge. And I used to go to everything I could. We would wait until everyone was seated to make sure we didn’t get in a seat that belonged to anybody, and then they would seat my mother. And I can remember plenty of times when all the seats were filled, and they used to set up a special chair for her in the aisle down front. We didn’t sit in the back. It was always down front. Um, but she loved culture. She used to go to operas.

English and reading were my favorite subjects. I loved English and I loved to read. My least favorite subject was arithmetic. I wasn’t very good at it. I didn’t like it.
I think that's why I wasn't good at it. And, of course, to this day, I don't know geography because my music lessons were always during geography class.

I used to go to the main Des Moines public library every week. I can remember going even with Mary Terese before I could really read because the children's library used to be downstairs and they had murals on the wall of the Indians and other things that used to have stereoptican slides. It's like this magnifying glass, that you put this picture in front of it, and you could see the picture. I would do that while Mary Terese was upstairs. When I got older, I used to go every week and bring home stacks of books. And that was an excursion. I used to have to take the streetcar to go to the library. I read a lot of books before I probably understood them. But my reading was never censored. Probably a lot of it was because they didn't pay attention. I read normal stuff for kids, too - Nancy Drew, Raggedy Ann and Andy, Bobsey Twins, you know. But I can also remember going to the library and taking out The Three Musketeers, which was by the way, a sinful thing to do, because it was banned by the Catholic Church. But I took it anyway. But I don't know how old I was, but I couldn't get through it. So I was probably way too young. I loved Heidi. I think Heidi and Little Women were my favorite books.

Nearly everyone read at home. John was a voracious reader. My mother was a voracious reader. She did not read a lot of books, but she read a lot of magazines. My father read Reader's Digest all the time. I don't know if he subscribed. I think he must have subscribed to it. He was a voracious reader. My mother liked to read True Detective Stories. Which probably is why I like detective books. She used to love to read True Detective magazines. I used to read a lot of movie magazines. My cousin, Marian, was a reader, too. We were all readers. My mother was a very firm believer in education. Aunt Emma used to tell me that even when she nursed her babies, she would nurse them laying down and read a magazine at the same time. My mother would also do that.

I don't think I would have dared to play hookey from school. I don't know where
I would have gone. I was always on the honor roll. I was basically well-behaved. Well, we were mischievous. When you go to an all-girls school, it’s got all nuns. And there’s boarding students. We all knew each other. There was only eighty-seven in our class in high school. When I was a sophomore, we had this nun, Sister Mary Rosalia, who we literally drove crazy. By tormenting her because she was a fuss-budget. I can remember once we had a dumb waiter in the school because the boarders lived on the third floor and the laundry was down in the basement. One of the boarding students decided she wanted to know what it would be like to try and slide down it. Well, she got caught, stuck, going down the dumb waiter. (laughter) We had to tell the nuns that she was stuck. We all got in trouble.

In high school, I had a minor lead in “Our Lady of Fatima.” We had a newspaper, and I would sell ads for that. I wrote cheers and songs, parody-songs for the cheerleaders for our basketball teams, because we had intramural, basketball tournaments. I was kind of the poet laureate (laughter) of the class. Just anything. I loved anything to do with theater or acting. I guess I was a ham. My parents thought that was just absolutely marvelous. And if I wasn’t in a play, I was certainly helping backstage with make-up or something, and they were delighted.

My mother’s basic attitude was that her children were going to be better educated than she was. And that education was very important. And that was how you got to be in the better position than your parents was through education. That’s where it all lay. Mother went to school until the third grade. My father, I don’t know. It would have had to have been in Italy. He could read and write in English and Italian. And so could my mother, write in Italian and read Italian.

I do remember going to night classes with her during the War. My mother had to go down every year and register as an alien. It’s my impression, that that’s when it first really occurred to her that she was not a natural-born American. She had been here from the time she was an infant. She learned she was an alien when they started requiring them to register every year. I think it almost came as a shock to her that she wasn’t a
native-born American. Dad was a naturalized citizen. It wasn't until after the war was over that she went to become a citizen. That was in 1945. She went to the classes and became a citizen. They gave you some kind of a certificate. She was very proud of it. She used to talk about that to her friends, that she was going to the classes, and that she was very excited about becoming a citizen.

Going to church was very important. I never missed. I can remember blizzards when the car wouldn't start. We'd walk to church rather than miss it. I don't think it ever occurred to us not. My father never went to church. Because he thought all priests were hypocrites. He said that in Italy all the priests had mistresses, and they were all hypocrites. Who were they to tell him how to live? But he was a very religious man. We would have never been able to say to him, "I'm not going to church, either." That was a personal thing with him. We all recognized that, and we never questioned it.

I think we attended church as a family more in the winter when it was so cold, and you didn't want to have to walk. In the summertime, it might have been different. I even used to go to Mass every day during Lent. It was very important. It was just a part of our being. It would have never have occurred to me not to go to church. Like I said, it was very important to go. Every day during Lent, I used to have get up and go to six-thirty Mass so I could get to school. If someone had told me that they were Italian, and they weren't Catholic, I would have been astounded. If you were an Italian, you were Catholic.

It was a very important part of my mother's life, too. But she had her priorities. When she died, Monsignor Lyons gave the homily at her funeral. He said that one of the things that he remembered about Lena, and we were very close with Monsignor Lyons, was that she used to go to Mass a lot during the week. That was something that we, kids, never knew a whole lot about. He remembered one day specifically when he wasn't saying the Mass. She went to leave early out the side door of the Cathedral into that courtyard and she met him. He must have said something to her about leaving early and she said, "I have some bread rising in the oven, and it is more important." He said that
day at her funeral, “I was kind of taken aback, but now that I think about it, I think she was right.” And so she left. So she was religious, but to her, letting the bread get ruined would have been a bigger sin than missing Mass. Because to her, wasting food was a sin. Worse sin than anything.

There was a crucifix around in our home. To her religion was a way of life in terms of how you treated other people. I don’t think there was a prejudiced bone in either one of their bodies. They were very tolerant and believed in the innate goodness of their fellow man. They treated everybody, rich, poor, alike, the same. Gave away a lot of food to people if they were hungry. There were no shrines around the house. No. None of that. We had a picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall. Picture of St. Cecelia on the wall. She was not at all superstitious. Hers was a more deeper faith. She did a lot of novenas. If they were having a mission or something, she always went to those. It was not a superstition that she needed.

**Cristine**

Oh, I loved my schooling. I started school when I was six years old, I think. I went to St. John’s grade school. We wore uniforms. I remember the classrooms. I got to school by city bus and walking. I remember when my niece Theresa started going, Theresa and Johnny, I remember walking to St. John’s. I think sometimes it might have depended on the weather. We had a block to get to the bus. I don’t know how close it let us off at school. And then again when I walked home I remember walking home in the fall and we would walk down the street with these old houses, that had been turned into apartment houses. Big old brick apartment houses. It was just beautiful. We would look for mushrooms and there were just these big beautiful trees. That was just Michael’s thing looking for mushrooms. So, we did that, too. And we found ‘em. We would find them on the way home and bring them home.

I suppose there were about thirty students in the class, but I don’t really know. My favorite subject? Probably wasn’t math. Probably anything that had any kind of
reading, history or religion. Maybe not much history. I probably liked the pictures in the books more than anything. I think I just loved school. I loved the atmosphere. I’m a teacher now. I loved the nuns. They were all so nice to me. They were so happy. I loved their names. They had funny names. I thought that I wanted to be a nun into high school. Well, after high school, it was the sixties then and I was glad that I didn’t become a nun. They were in sad shape. I just think that they have kind of lost their sense of mission. If I would have joined, I probably would have left. My homeroom teacher, my senior year, thought I had a vocation.

Mostly, when I was young, I liked to play outdoors. We had a big tire swing. I had cousins to play with. Rhonda, we both liked to read. I loved to do crafts. I loved to draw. I don’t remember a lot of the movies. I’m sure I did. Joanne said that she always had to take me. I won this art scholarship at the art center and I thought that was great. I loved to draw. I also have a deep lifelong resentment of my father and my mother because I wanted to take piano lessons but because your mother and Aunt Mary never kept up with their piano lesson, they wouldn’t even let me start. I thought that was a real bummer. So, I could have been a great pianist but I didn’t get to play the piano.

I didn’t feel pushed to get a college education. I didn’t even think of college until I was a senior in high school. It was more like, what would I do if I didn’t go to college. I wasn’t discouraged to go because I was a girl. No, not at all. I don’t think so. I was smart enough to go. I got a scholarship to Clark. I went to a Catholic college for a year. It was a nice place, fun. But it was extremely expensive and I felt that I wasn’t sure that it was worth all that. I didn’t see how going to a Catholic college was giving me what I couldn’t have gotten at Iowa State. So, I finished at Iowa State.

I might have taken to my Catholic upbringing more than my brothers and sisters. I might have needed it more at that point in my life. It was a different time period than now, certainly. But I think that I got the same good education that my brothers and sisters did. You see, Church was very important. We were Catholic. It was expected that we go to Mass every week. Oh, my father didn’t. But, my mother did. Everybody
else did as far as I know. When I was in school, I went everyday. I think mom was matter of fact about it. I think my parents’ attitude toward church was very typical of what you found in Italy. The men didn’t go and if they did, they stayed in the back.

 The Church is an important part of the lives of the Porti family but is not emphasized or given much focus at home. Their religious upbringing was mainly in the hands of the priests and nuns and was directly associated to their overall education within the parochial school system. Their upbringing at home included learning the trade of working in a grocery store, attending theatrical and musical events at the KRNT theater and the pleasure of reading. A college degree was not stressed, or prohibited - except in the case of Mary Terese. Eventually, four out of the eight children attended some college: John and Frank became professionals, Christine received her Masters and is an educator, and Joanne has attended community college for years taking classes for the enjoyment of it. One of the interesting stories I heard in Belsito, concerning the Porti family, was in reference to the fact that Frank was a dentist and John a doctor. The story was told to me by a cousin of Lena’s who lived in Chicago for many years before returning to Belsito. She said that John Porti really pushed to have his sons become doctors so that he could prove himself worthy to Lena’s family. This idea was linked to the fact that Lena’s grandfather had not been thrilled with the match because of John’s very humble beginnings in Belsito. If this story is true, it is unknown to Lena and John’s offspring who all felt their parents were not so interested in whether they received a college education or not.

 In the case of the third generation, there are doctors, lawyers and several others receiving degrees past undergraduate. The majority of this generation have attended college and are working as professionals in some capacity or another.
FOOD CONSUMPTION, PREPARATION AND PRODUCTION

"The only thing I think is Italian is what we eat..."

Next to the family, food and drink has a special place in the life of Italian Americans. They like to eat it. Prepare it. Grow it. Talk about it. And most of all share it. Food is the focal point of most family festivals from Sunday dinners to weddings. It can be argued that thanks to commercial marketing there is definitely an Italian American cuisine that many of the original immigrants would not recognize as Italian. Food is the easiest area in which one can judge one's "Italianness" against that of another's. However, as with other cultural traits, food preparation and consumption depends on the family's origin in Italy. The simple Calabrian fare consists of a variety of pasta cooked with beans or other vegetables. Pork seems to be the meat of choice. As all the other elements of the Des Moines Italian heritage becomes more American, recipes and cooking styles are the most tangible element that is passed from one generation to the next.

The family garden is an important link with their Calabrian origin. The transition from rural to city was made easier by maintaining their connection with the land. It is hard to weigh the symbolic value of the garden in the lives of the Italian immigrants. One thing is certain, no matter where a family lived in Des Moines, they found a space for their tomatoes and peppers. Many of the second generation immigrants claimed that the family garden was vital for aiding their survival during the Depression.

A quick survey of most of the major works concerning Italian Americans reveals little or no mention of gardens. I feel this is not because the Italians did not have them, but that the researchers did not find it an important element in exploring Italian American ethnicity.
Michael


I used to help my mother out all the time in the kitchen. We had special times of the year when she’d make ravioli. By the time I remember helping her, we had the machine that rolled the dough flat. We also used to make sausage coil. We would do this at a big round table. We’d buy fifty pounds of meat - roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. Italian sausage has in it ground pork, coarse ground pork and spices - red pepper, paprika, black pepper, and fennel.

The ravioli were done with the hand-cranked machine. We make it today, the same way mother used to make it. Yeah, exactly. We put ground pork in it. Once in a while there’d be a little beef in there, but generally ground pork. We also made those little bullet shapes - cavitelli. Ravioli was my favorite and also crustellas and taralli. Mother made the taralli straight. Just like Lucille makes. No, I think she might have braided them into the shapes, like pretzels. Crustella is just bread dough. Taralli is the one you put the anise in. Mother called it aranza. I don’t know if that is Calabrese or what. It was kind of something that held the families together across the ocean. We would send them clothes, and to show their appreciation, they would send us anise wrapped in cloth. Maybe, a thing about as big as a brick. Sewed shut, put in a cloth bag, you know what flour used to come in, and then sew it up real tight. And mail it. That’s where we’d get ours from Italy. We’d send clothing and stuff, and they’d send anise in appreciation. It wasn’t a quid pro quid, but I know it used to come in the mail from Italy.

Mom generally got help when she made ravioli. They used to make quite a bunch. I was the oldest, so I would help. Her sisters would come over. Ange Rua, a family friend, would usually be there. We didn’t have a freezer. She would make enough for the meal and have plenty of leftovers. Keep that in the refrigerator. They had an icebox, and later on, our refrigerator. Mamma did the main cooking in the family. Nobody else.
We didn’t do a lot of baking. That was done was by Mamma. We used to get some baked goods from Maude. The one that raised Joey. She was a good baker. Tremendous. She came from a farm down near La Villa, a southeast coal town. She’d go down there during the summer, and usually bring back raspberries and whipping cream. If we couldn’t use it, we’d make butter out of it. And she’d invite us up to her house, ‘cause my mother helped keep her alive during the Depression days. Mother baked bread, but not on a regular basis. She was usually too busy. She’d make a cake or a pie once in a while.

Mother was an excellent cook. We had a customer, Mrs. Clark, who was manager of the KRNT Theater, the building down where the telephone company is today. Mrs. Clark would book the shows, the traveling shows for the theater. All sorts of stuff, the Liz and Yolanda dance team, Tito Ceasar, Aaron Marshall, a good Baritone. He was the lead when they put on an operetta with local talent. Anyhow, Mrs. Clark, she was in charge of this and I went down to all the plays. If the seats were sold out, she’d have her usher get a chair and put me down in front of everybody. Right, stage front there, and I was sitting in front of everybody watching these operettas which were fun with some big stars.

This Liz and Yolanda team came to town and Mrs. Clark wanted to give a dinner party for them. Actually this happened about three or four times. Then we’d cook a good Italian dinner for ‘em. My mother enlisted the help of a couple of Italian women. The kitchen in the basement of this KRNT theater is where we cooked up this dinner. One time, this Italian guy helped. He took a chicken and removed all the bones without cutting the skin. I don’t know how he did it, but he just did it. Completely boneless, and it come off all sagging. Looked like a duck. And they serve it to you, just slice it. That’s what he did. She used to make guandas and stuff like that. She made cavatelli on a machine. She is one of the first to have a machine. The machine was no different now than what it was then. Except ours had a wooden component and was stainless steel.

My father was a typical Italian gardener. We had a garden at the first house. I
can remember buying tomatoes in cans. However, my mother would can a lot of tomatoes. Well, he used to garden behind the store. It was just a backyard garden, fifty tomatoes, fifty peppers. That's just about all there was there. My dad didn't really have time for a big garden. When I got older, 6th or 7th grade, I took care of the garden. I weeded it and hoed it. We had a raspberry patch, but it never did anything. I planted those back there. I did the grafting at the house on Pleasant Street. The backyard was fifty feet by one hundred feet. We planted no garlic, but probably onions and also green beans. We canned some of them, yeah. Sold a lot of them, too, at the store. There was just wild grapes on the fence. There are a lot of wild grapes. I got 'em down here. We would mainly just eat them. Occasionally, I've made jelly out of some.

Canning paste is a lot of work. You take and pour the tomatoes into the sink. She'd wash the tomatoes in the sink. Wash 'em. Core 'em. And boil 'em in big pans. And even small washtubs. She's cook that up and let it cool down and run it through a sieve. Which you manage by hand. Cook that down, well, you cook that down a lot more than we do. And then can 'em. That's the paste. I can remember when I got a little older, I would need to check the basement when I got home from school. If Mom had time that night to can the tomatoes, she would wait for me.

Tomatoes is easy. You just core and clean the tomatoes and dip 'em in scalding water to take the skin off. You're not going to put it through the colander at that point. You got more solid tomatoes. And you do a couple hundred quarts of each way. Spent about a month in the fall doing this.

I also went mushroom hunting from the time I was a little kid. Since as long as I can remember. I just learned from my dad. They had certain varieties that were common to Italy and the United States. And he showed me about four different kinds. As the years progressed, I learned more from different people. The *nusca*, the one we used to call the buttons. *Fennelli*, which the English name is "oyster mushrooms". And then there was one they used to call timberjack. I don't know what their American name is. Almost exclusively Italians hunted the kind of mushrooms we did. 'Though, American people
were out during the spring for morrells. We didn’t know where to go or when to go. And nobody ever taught us ‘cause they were highly prized. Very secretive affair.

When I found some mushrooms, I gave them to my mother. She’d partly boil ‘em and then cook them with tomatoes and peppers. Mushrooms were considered a real treat. Highly prized. Well, I used to hunt ‘em with my dad all the time. And, then on Sundays, he might call the Pete T. or somebody else, and we’d go out, and take us kids out. Nice outing for us all the time. We used to find lots of mushrooms. Oh, you just hunted mushrooms. There was no conversation.

Francis

My dad would plant the garden. Michael and I used to work at it. Along with the garden, we had a peach tree, I think. My dad was a genius with fruit trees. He really was. My dad knew so much about it. He could even prune a tree; he could graft a tree. He used to take a branch from another tree and he would make a slash in the bark, and then he’d take these two, and he’d wrap it with string and tie them together. And then they would grow into a single branch. He was really good at that. Well, it would change the character of the tree. Yeah.

My mother liked to cook all kinds of food. Italian and American. For instance, Christmas they had the same thing as we have today. Italian food like ravioli. We usually would have a turkey, strange kind of a combination. My wife made ravioli all the time when the kids were growing up. All the time. And then when the kids got grown up, then I kind of took it over. I make sauce the way Noah Lacona taught me. I don’t remember how my mother made it, but I always liked her sauce. And his mother and my mother were very close friends, and they cooked very much alike.

Mary Terese

I love spaghetti. I like polenta...we used to fix that a lot on Fridays. Oh, my mother was big on Italian foods: spaghetti, meatballs, stuffed peppers, stuffed eggplant,
fried peppers. My dad liked soupy dishes. She could cook any kind of pasta, with beans or potatoes, or, whatever, we always had pasta.

Sunday’s the only day I remember that we all ate together. That’s the only time my dad and my mother were both home. There was a period then when the store wasn’t open on Sundays. We would eat at noon on Sunday. It’d always be pasta of some kind, and maybe chicken, fried chicken, or a roast, or stuffed peppers, meatballs, sausage, Italian sausage. Every Saturday, as far as I can remember, I always made a cake that was for Sunday. My mother was a good cook. She could make a cake without a recipe. She never used a recipe when she cooked. She’d make a cake or she made wonderful pies. Everything was put on the table; Mom and everybody ate together.

My mother made a lot of Italian stuff that the people on the Southside didn’t know anything about, like those wine cookies and the Bishop’s bread. It was just different things with the Italians on the Southside. Mother did most of the cooking. I always had to clean up the dishes and so forth. The only thing I remember doing is making the dessert, the cake.

Both Francis and John’s friends used to like to hang out at our house ‘cause of my mother’s cooking. When Francis was on the football team, my mother used to have a lot of dinners for the football team. She was amazing. If ten people walked in the house, an hour from now she’d have a great meal. You didn’t know where she got all the food. I’m not good at that. I have to know ahead of time what I’m making. She used to cook a lot of dinners. There was a lady who ran the Shrine Auditorium. Later on it became the KRNT theater. At that time, it was the biggest live theater in the country. A lot of movie stars used to come to the theater. We used to get to go to all of the shows for nothing. This lady, a friend of my mother’s, always told us to come down there when the show started and we would get in there for nothing. My mother used to cook a lot of dinners for this woman’s rich friends. My mother could have been a caterer, you know. She loved to cook.

Any holiday meal that we had, pasta was the main thing. Sometimes it was
ravioli, and of course, we always had the turkey. Turkey or sometimes we had roast or chicken. In the winter time, we ate a lot of pheasant, rabbit, 'cause they used to hunt a lot, my Dad and the boys. The holidays and the winter time, that was the best time. My mother used to make stistusu and scupesh. Stistusu is pickled pigs feet and ears. She’d make a big crock of it. And the scupesh was eggplant and, uh, and all this stuff - we had a big back porch. In the wintertime that was part of our refrigerator, ‘cause everything would stay cold out there. They would make their own Italian sausage. We got a room in the basement. We used to call it the fruit room because that is where all our canned goods went. They used to have these holes across in which to hang up all these sausages to dry. You know, it is a wonder that we didn’t die of poisoning, because it was pork.

Christmas was mostly celebrated with just a big dinner. We always had a Christmas tree. You see mostly that was a big part of it - the meal. ‘Cause there were always a lot of extra things. We would either go to Mass Christmas Eve or early in the morning before we opened our presents. We never ever opened our gifts on Christmas Eve.

**John**

Father had a garden. When we lived in the first house, there was no place for a garden. When we moved to the house beside the store, there was a large back yard section of that which he put a garden in every summer. I remember that distinctly because that’s one of the few chores that fell to me was every spring. I had to dig that up. With a spade. It was a lot of work. It took me a long time. I used to hate spring coming because that would mean that I would have to dig up the garden.

My father mainly took care of the garden. Even at that time Michael used to be interested in the garden. And I was interested in helping. It was fun to plant it. And actually the garden did contribute produce to the market. But to me, the garden was always more than that. There was more to the garden than making a few bucks off the produce. It was something more than a hobby. I got the idea that it meant something to
my father to have this garden.

There were tomatoes, and peppers mostly. A few other things. It seems to me there was a fruit tree or two. But mostly tomatoes and peppers. But those I remember very vividly. Planting tomatoes and peppers. I think there was an effort to grow a few grapes around the house but I don’t think it ever came to anything. We used to make wine but there was access to grapes through the produce markets. Grapes were a delicate product. I remember in the fall, my mother would pick up a truck load of grapes that somebody felt were going bad or something, and they wanted to sell real cheap. Dad would make his wine out of that. I never helped but I remember down in the basement the press and the casks that we made the wine with. I don’t recall participating in it.

My father drank some and there was always wine but we didn’t drink it at all. I don’t think any of the children drank wine at all. And if we wanted to, I’m sure we could have because my father drank it at a meal just like water. But we never tried it. I may have tried it but I didn’t like it at that time if I did. I can’t remember any of my brothers or sisters drinking wine at the table.

My mother used to can a lot of things. Mostly tomatoes. She’d also can produce from the store which was readily available and practically free for her, you see. Just for home use. And she always canned tomatoes and made tomato paste which is a lengthy process. A lot of work. Oh, you have to squeeze the tomatoes. I’m not sure how they got the juice out of them. It was a lengthy process, I know. You had to squeeze the tomatoes, squeeze the pulp. I don’t know whether they’d pour off the juice or what they did. She’d can tomatoes and also can tomato paste. A lot of times she’d use canned tomato paste because making tomato paste was hard work. I helped with the canning. To some extent. All of us boys participated in that to some extent. My sister, my mother. Everybody did.

I remember food the most. Every Sunday, my mother would start cooking the sauce in the morning. You could smell it cooking and then usually in the early afternoon, it would be ready and she’d make the pasta. If it was a festive occasion she’d make
ravioli or something. But for sure every Sunday, there would be a big pot of sauce on the stove and pasta. Spaghetti. That was the common one. Although occasionally she would make ravioli and these things that looked like a little shell. On festive occasions, Christmas, there'd be some little pastries made that I don't really know the name of. She'd make these pastries. They were delicate gold, dipped in honey and kind of like a fried doughnut. She might make up a batch of crustella. I always thought those were good. Very fattening. She made good soup. A lot of lentils. Pasta used in soups. Chick peas. I don't know what she called those. I didn't learn to call them chick peas until I left home. But actually, I don't think we ate as Italian as most Italians did. Ate a lot of meat. Chicken, potatoes, pretty American diet.

I can't ever recall my sister cooking. I'm sure she must have helped some but I can't ever recall her actually doing the cooking. Mother didn't make bread. She bought bread. Quite often she drove to the Southside and bought Italian bread baked in the brick ovens. In fact, we usually had bread of that nature. Never opened up a loaf of the squishy bread.

It was inevitable on Sunday that the whole family would gather for this big meal of pasta. And there would be more than pasta. There'd may be a roast that was cooked with the pasta and maybe several entrees. But otherwise, the rest of the week, I don't recall sitting down to a meal. Everyone just sort of ate as they went in and out. Usually just the family. Oh, I shouldn't say that. I remember a fair number of guests, but usually the family. Sometimes guests. Table was usually heavily laden, quite a spread. As I recall, everything was put on the table at once. Pasta was what we all liked. Usually there was a pork roast cooked in sauce I used to love. Still do.

Maybe there is an Italian attitude about food but I don't think it was particularly manifested in our family. I don't think food was any more emphasized in our family than it was in any family, except for my parents. I think for my parents. I think they may have emphasized the eating a little more than the kids did. Anyone who came to the house would be invited to eat something, drink something. No matter who they were,
even if they weren’t a friend. You would offer them food and drink. Everybody. I told you about the colored workman who used to work for her. She would feed him lunch even though he only lived down the street. She’d feed him.

I’m not sure where it started but there was a recipe for a chocolate cake which was made with hot water. Very rich Devil’s food cake. I know when I left home, whenever I tried a piece of chocolate cake, it just wasn’t like the cake I got at home. I finally asked my sister Mary Terese about that and she sent me the recipe. We’ve used it ever since. My children have all taken the recipe when they leave home.

When we make the pasta sauce, we make it much like my mother made it. I had to experiment because my mother was dead before I ever started doing any cooking. If I wanted to make pasta, I sort of remembered how she made it and tried different things and finally got it so it tasted quite right.

My father occasionally would make Italian sausage. ‘Course he had everything there at the store to make it with. The grinder to grind up hamburger, so he’d get the casings and make Italian sausage. He’d hang it in the basement from the water pipes and hang it over there until it was all eaten up. Excellent. It was usually very hot.

Christmas was, really Christmas Eve, a big holiday. We’d always have the traditional Christmas with a tree and presents and going to Midnight Mass and everything. And every holiday, of course, there would be extra baking and extra food making. The big banquet served that day. On Thanksgiving, it was usually Italian food. Although there might be a big roast or a turkey or something along with the pasta and that. On festive occasions she’d invariably make ravioli -- something special rather than just plain pasta. There was no question about what the centerpiece was: the pasta.

Joey

God, I hated that garden. Because it was one-fifty by one-fifty and we spaded it by hand. One spadeful at a time, every spring. That was me, as soon as I got old enough to push the spade in the ground. ‘Cause I was the youngest. It was progression. Michael
and then Francis and then John and then me. (chuckle) In the garden were tomatoes, peppers, beans, eggplant. We had a grape vine. I think it was there when they got the property. And it ran from probably one hundred and fifty feet down the fence. That’s why I don’t like grape jelly ‘cause that was the only kind we had. ‘Cause the grapes were there and that’s the only thing we could afford. I was probably out of high school before I knew what it was to eat a peach or a pear that didn’t have a spot on it. ‘Cause we sold the good stuff. (chuckle) But it was good.

Well, when I was young, unfortunately I was not living at home and living with these people. It was strictly a meat and potatoes thing. And so consequently, I don’t like vegetables. I don’t ever eat ‘em. I eat at home on weekends. Sunday was a sit-down spaghetti dinner. Everybody was there early afternoon. I’m sure there were vegetables there. I didn’t eat ‘em. I was a spaghetti eater. Still am.

In retrospect, I think my dad did drink a lot. After he got sick, why he didn’t so much. I never saw my dad drunk, by any matter or means. But he would take a shot of whiskey a couple times a day. The bottle was sitting in the cupboard. He was the only one that drank it. I remember every year, you always knew it was time to make the wine, ‘cause you’d be walking home from school and you could see the gnats around the house. You knew the grapes were in the basement. (laughter) We made our own wine. We used to have to press those things and press. And he’d say, “Give it another little squeeze.” They’d put Johnny and I, one on each side of the handle, and we’d squeeze them grapes dry. He made two barrels of wine every year.

And the other time that you know when something was cooking about a block away was when you could smell the baccala. Baccala is salted codfish. Mom used to get ‘em in pieces that probably weighed twenty to thirty pounds. Oh, maybe be that long. The whole body of the codfish. And it’d be on the back porch. Well, I didn’t eat it.

40None of the siblings can agree as to whether their father drank a lot or not. It is clear that alcohol is not an important factor in their household. In fact, today, none of the siblings seem to do much drinking except for an occasional glass of wine.
(laughter) Oh, it would stink. She’d fix the baccala. I don’t remember how they fixed it. I think they canned it some way. I know it was terrible. She’d also get pigs feet, snouts and ears and she’d pickle ‘em. I remember we used to love ‘em.

I was usually in the store when they were canning tomatoes. But, I used to have to make the tomato paste, yeah. We had to do it at night. I don’t really remember much about the canning of it. There was a fruit room downstairs. And there was a little crack in the wall. It let just enough circulation in there, that we’d make sausage and we’d hang it down there. It would dry in there during the wintertime, dry cure. And we’d have our own home-made pepperoni. Oh, it was good. God, it was good.

Mom made the sausage. That was her province. At that time, she used to grind the meat in the store, bring it in. We had a kitchenette where she’d spread the meat out all over that thing. And she’d put the spices on it. Then us four boys, one on each side, would start mixing it. Whatever you do, don’t touch your eyes. Well, Michael forgot one day, and he reached up and rubbed his eye. And he about whipped us, ‘cause it was hot pepper and it burned. He about went crazy for about an hour trying to get that washed out. (chuckle) Sausage has hot pepper, red hot pepper or pepperoni rosso as it’s called in the store. And anise seed\textsuperscript{41} and salt. And paprika for coloring as it really didn’t do much for the flavor. That’s the way I still make it today. Salt, red pepper, anise seed, and a little paprika for color. It’s delicious.

We used to have a huge amount of Christmas presents under the tree. I always remember that. One Christmas, they had to play a trick on me because I was the youngest. They took a toilet paper box and filled it full of wrappers and put a brick in the middle of it. And I kept unwrapping and unwrapping and all that was in it was a brick. (laughter) But we got the biggest sock we could find, and it was usually one of Mom’s long stockings and we hung it up and that morning it was full of stuff that wasn’t rotten. (chuckle) Oranges and walnuts and candy bars or a package of gum. This was a

\textsuperscript{41}Actually, it is fennel seed.
big deal to us then. We didn’t stay up too late. We used to get up and go to five o’clock Mass the next morning. Christmas Eve was no big deal. We had pasta for Christmas dinner. Usually ravioli. At least twice a year we had ravioli. Christmas and Easter.

Joan

We had a big garden. Tomatoes, peppers, and raspberry bushes. We had strawberries. We had cucumbers. Although he was never very successful with cucumbers. And my father had a green thumb, but he was just not very good with cucumbers. We had an apple tree in the backyard. We had a peartree. He was very good at grafting. We had an apple tree with five different kinds of apples on it that he’d grafted. A huge garden. Father did the garden until he got too old. Michael took over after that. So there was always a garden until we left. Until, probably, until I got married. There was always a garden.

We always had spaghetti. If we didn’t have meat, we didn’t have meat. It wasn’t anything that was any big deal to us. We ate mostly Italian food, I think. A lot of pasta, spaghetti, *pastacini*. Although I was never really very fond of *pastacini*. It’s baked *rigatoni* and they used to put boiled eggs with it and bake it with mozzarella cheese. It was always very dry to me. I didn’t much like it. She always used to make it with rigatoni. We did have pot roast on Sundays. And lentil soup. She used to make good lentil soup. She used to make a lot of soups. Meatball soup. Cornmeal mush, on Fridays because we couldn’t eat meat, with kidney beans. Polenta. It was one of my favorite things. She used to make spaghetti with bread crumbs which I detested, too. I wouldn’t eat it. I suppose a lot of the things were Italianized by her. My mother was an incredible cook and I don’t think she ever had a recipe. She could just throw things together and make the best meals. I loved lentil soup. I loved the meatball soup. Ravioli were a favorite.

My mother did the cooking, but Mary Terese did the baking. My mother, for being a wonderful cook, she could make pies, but she couldn’t make a cake to save her
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soul. Because she never followed a recipe and you do have to follow a recipe when you have a cake. Mary Terese made the desserts.

It wasn’t ‘til she got sick that she made an effort to teach me any cooking. I think most of what I learned was by observing, because the kitchen was the focal point of the house. And so I’d be back there. And I would watch, for instance. I would always put cold water in the spaghetti after cooking because mother did it. I didn’t know why you did it. She did it; I did it. It wasn’t ‘til years later, that I realized that it stopped the cooking action. I figured if she did it, she had good reason for it, and it should be done. So a lot of what I learned was by watching. But she did make then an effort when she got sick and knew that she didn’t have long to live to show me how to do things. I think she realized that she didn’t have much time left and she had better get it done. I think she probably did the same thing with Mary Terese as Mary Terese got older. And Mary Terese learned most of it like me, observing and being. It was a huge kitchen. I used to iron in the kitchen. So I’d be ironing and she’d be cooking.

Lunch was basically whoever was around. I mean, we were in school, of course, it would have just been her, and always supper. *But supper was all of us.* Sunday dinner was at one o’clock. We would all sit down to eat Sunday dinner. I can remember times when, on Sundays, because Francis would always come over on Sunday after church, to see mother, to visit mother. And he’d be there about when it was time to eat, and my mother would always make him go home and eat. She said, “That’s not nice for you to eat here when your wife has dinner waiting for you.” She would make him go.

It was basically spaghetti. If there was meat, there was meat. If there wasn’t, there wasn’t. But it was mostly spaghetti. And probably a salad and bread. She would see that everybody was served first. At the dinner table, there wasn’t much discussion on the part of us kids. My mother was a big believer in children should be seen and not heard, so I don’t think the kids said a whole lot. I think it was probably mostly her and my dad discussing the grocery store or maybe customers or something like that. Possibly as the boys got older and Francis was playing sports that they maybe discussed that.
For Thanksgiving we had capon, which is an over-sized chicken. They do something to it and it gets to be ten or twelve pounds. Sometimes there would be two of them. I don’t think we ever had turkey. And we’d have spaghetti of some kind. I’m not quite sure what. Um, but there’d be sweet potatoes and salad and cranberry sauce and pumpkin pies. Thanksgiving wasn’t that big of a deal.

Christmas was the big holiday for us. Christmas day itself and the meal was just our family. And of course the wives when they got married and had kids and stuff. I was always around when they made ravioli. I was always the meat taster because you couldn’t eat meat the day before Christmas and we always used to make it the day before Christmas. Very strict. And I always got to taste it because my mother said that God wouldn’t think it would be a sin if I did it ‘cause I was just a kid. And I didn’t mind, because it was delicious. I didn’t mind eating that at all. But she was very strict. I tasted it and that was about it.

There’d be a big Christmas Eve party at our house. Most of the time it was at our house. I remember once or twice being over at Aunt Emma’s, but their house wasn’t nearly as big as ours. And we used to have wonderful Christmas Eve parties. We’d play games. We’d play cards. Christmas Eve is a very strict fast day. And there was, some kind of tradition with Italians about different courses like baccala and different kinds of fishes and stuff. Supposed to eat seven different kinds. But they were all gross to me. I never touched any of ‘em. There was pasta and bread crumbs and baccala.

I don’t know if it was founded on the basis of the strict fasting and all that. I don’t know. All I know is that there was certain things that we had Christmas Eve because my mother used to cook, fix dinner. And then we would have the party. I don’t know if there was a whole lot of food then. And we would basically party all night. We used to go to five o’clock Mass the next morning and then the party would break up. But we would stay up and go to five o’clock Mass because we couldn’t open presents until after we’d been to church. So we all went to five o’clock Mass and came home. And then opened the presents. We didn’t go to bed. Oh, we gave gifts to each other.
I remember Easter because we used to make the Easter breads. The chicken with the egg in the butt. They used to call them Easter baskets where they would be round ones with colored eggs and had, it was delicious bread. It was made with anise seed in it. There was always ham. Sometimes we would have pheasant. We ate a lot of pheasant. My mother used to cook rabbit, too. But I never ate rabbit. I was kind of a fussy eater when I was a kid.

Cristine

I didn’t have a consistent household for one thing. The only thing I think is Italian is what we eat. And some of our personalities. We eat pasta twice a week. Ravioli is all that was special at Christmas. I don’t remember anything else about Christmas, no presents or anything. Oh, I do remember Kathleen telling me that there was no Santa Claus. And I remembered thinking who cares as long as I get a present. I do remember hearing a lot about Christmas, the tree, the fireplace.

Bread. I remember making the bread and I got to eat the raw dough. I loved raw dough. I still do. I don’t know if I remember anything else she made. I remember her cutting off chicken’s heads in the back yard and they would run around. I remember my father wanting corn meal mush, polenta, with kidney beans and sauce on the top and I remember thinking that was really yucky. And pickled pigs feet. I remember a big pot of pickled pigs feet. I thought that was really gross except I thought that was kind of neat with the jelly. I remember Michael cooking nuscas and them stinking to high heaven. Now I love it. But when I was little, I wouldn’t eat vegetables. In fact, I wouldn’t eat. I remember hiding an Easter egg basket once and it eventually began smelling.

*Out of curiosity, I did a contextual comparison of how often items of food were*
mentioned in comparison to how often items of religion were. It was no contest. This is not to conclude that food is more important than religion, but it is certainly discussed more by the Porti family. Food consumption and preparation was and is very important in the lives of the Porti family and Italian Americans in general. I often like to joke that my aunts and uncles are the only people I know that, throughout the consumption of a large meal, can be talking about the preparation of another meal. It is hard to describe the symbolic nature of food sharing within the lives of Italians and Italian Americans. Like her mother fed all of Frank and John’s friends on a regular basis, my mother, Joanne, would often have my older sibling’s friends or the neighborhood kids over for pizza on Fridays when I was a child. Without exception, the Porti siblings refer to their mother’s cooking skills and the importance that she placed on being a good cook. Whenever we visited family members as a child, food and drink was placed in front of us and there was no question that we finish it to the last bite whether we liked it or not. In Belsito, regardless of the time of day, my host would insist that I eat something upon visiting their house. The insistence, at times, took on an intensity that implied a refusal was a great insult. Food giving is a means of bond building with family and friends. The almost frightening, but somewhat amusing, component of this cultural behavior is that I see it in myself with family and friends. Whenever guests come to my apartment, I find myself preparing more food than they can possibly eat and insisting that they try. Even if it is only a short visit, I am disappointed if my guest does not partake in something from my home, coffee, tea or merely a glass of water.

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42 This was done with FLEXTEXT, a contextual analysis computer program that tabulates the number of times certain words are phrases are used within the interviews and then gives a percentage of word use in comparison to all the other words used.
I was glad we didn’t live in the Italian community because..."

The relationship of the American Italians (the term 52% of them feel best describes their ethnicity) with the other citizens of Des Moines was one of relative harmony with the occasional moments of misunderstanding. Those who lived on the Southside, in the tight-knit familial community, perceived a greater amount of bigotry than those Italians who were raised in other areas of the city. Italian was used in 85% of all the Italian households, while 65% of the children of the immigrants spoke Italian.

Baptisms, weddings and funerals were times for the American Italians to reinforce and build kinship bonds. Dating and courtship styles seem to be specifically dictated by their Italian ethnicity.

To the Italian immigrants, religiosity was intense but not confined to Catholicism. It is no secret that Italians thought themselves surrounded by mystic forces that could influence their lives for both good and ill. The affascinata is specifically a Calabrian belief. The extent one believed or did not believe in such a concept, is often associated to their state of Americanization.

Michael

Downtown Des Moines was the hub of all the city. If you needed clothes, you went downtown. Shoes, you went downtown. You want fruits and vegetables, you go to the City Market. Downtown from our place was just a walk down the hill. Or you could take the streetcar. It was a good-sized metropolis. They had several movie theaters. Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, Younkers, a lot of business downtown. After the war,
it became more suburban. People came back and most things were growing out away from the center. The population was growing.

On the Southside, just a predominance of the people were Italian. They did have some stores. It was very common, if you were in the area, you could walk a couple of blocks and not hear any English. I remember going down there. If you went to somebody’s house where there was somebody old, they spoke, like with my mother, spoke mostly Italian. But, most people, spoke English. With a dialect, of course. With an accent. There were a few grocery stores in the shopping area, like SW 9th and Park Avenue. Lots of backyard gardens. Tomatoes and peppers, basically. Oh, there was grapes around, yeah. Was all kinds of stuff. Not overwhelmingly, but everywhere. Everywhere and in every area, there was grapes, tomatoes, and peppers. And then in the summertime, there was a lot of truck gardening. And that stuff was sold to the public through grocery stores. And they would be common markets. Once Court Avenue from 1st to 5th, on both sides of the street, were truck gardeners selling their stuff. Even when I was really young, only they used horses and wagons. You’d back into the curb. And cars, trucks, backing into the curb. And then you’d open up the back of it and display your goods. Lot of people from the Southside, a lot of Italians doing that. And a lot of Germans doing that.

I never noticed any prejudice because I was Italian. Never at St. John’s. Never at Dowling. As I grew older, I became aware of the history of the people, the Vatican and Florence and all that stuff. We were proud to be an Italian, but never consciously.

It was pretty typical for women to stay home for childbirth. My mother was attended by a midwife when we were born. Now, what that implied, I don’t know. If she was at the hospital with Cristine, I don’t know. I think most of the others were delivered by midwife. I’d say this was fairly common. It was not even considered to go to a hospital.

I must have been about six or seven years old when I can remember seeing women come in the store swollen, you know. And I asked my mother, “What’s the matter with
her?” And she’d tell me, “She’s gonna’ have a baby.” I never noticed this with my own mother. She didn’t show much when she was pregnant. The last month or month and a half, two months she would show. When a kid was born in our house, what would usually happen is they would get us kids out of the house. I don’t remember where we went. Just get us out of the house. Probably over to Aunt Emma’s or something like that. We’d come home and there’d be the baby.

Mom said a few things about having children. A couple of times, the last couple anyhow. She wasn’t too thrilled about it. And the other one after me and Francis, we were too young to tell if she was overjoyed or not. I don’t think there was any birth control. Just the way it went. I think she had a couple of miscarriages. Between Joanne and Joe probably.

In those days, we didn’t go to a doctor for much of anything. Vicks Vapo-rub is the only thing I remember her doing if we were sick. I remember that. I hated that. (chuckle) My dad used to use a weed for a burn or a scrape. I think it’s called plantain. Ever see that wild weed that grows in the parkings of the...and with the big seed stalks along the center? Gets about that tall. I don’t know if it worked. He did it to me. Well, I guess it would after a few days. (chuckle) Who’s to say if I would have healed in the same amount of time or not.

I don’t know whether an Italian funeral was different than any other. I only went to Italian ones. I remember either my grandfather or my grandmother dying. The wake was held in their house on Pleasant Street, not at the funeral home. I was pretty young. I can remember where the casket was in the house. I remember all the people coming around. Generally the wake lasted two days. There was a lot of crying at those wakes.

There was supposed to be a year of mourning. Whether it actually was or what, if they did or not, I don’t know. Well, if you were a girl in the family, you don’t get married for a year. If you’re a boy, either one. Back then it was kind of a bone of contention when, after my grandmother died, Uncle Joey got married shortly thereafter. And there was some bad feelings about that. I don’t know if the family actually didn’t go
to the wedding or what happened.

I really enjoyed the old-time weddings. Big wing-ding downtown in a rented hall. Dancing, cooking barrels, cooking spaghetti in tubs. Dancing...Money...The old men sitting around the table throws money out there and the kids would get out and grab it up. Nickels and dimes and pennies, maybe once in a while a quarter was in there. You found a treasure when you found a quarter. A lot of Italian music. Oh, big deal. We kids used to love 'em. I'd say I was ten or eleven when Aunt Laura got married. Her parents paid for the whole thing. They did the whole thing with the throwing of the money. That was a staple of activity at the Italian weddings. Just part of the festivities.

They didn't say we had to marry Italian. Nor did they even push me toward marriage. I was scared to death of girls. (laughter) I had no dates. Was I unusual? I don't know. Well, I didn't have any pals, either. No friends. But, me and my cousins were close. I was petrified of girls.

I only met Lucille because she had gone to school with Mary Terese. When I came home from the Navy on leave, I seen her. After I'd graduated from high school, Mary was still going to high school. And Lucille, she'd come over once and a while and I'd be home. Well, when I left home for the war, I wrote a letter home to Mary Terese and said, "Have Lucille write me if she would." You know girls were gung-ho for "treating the troops nice," you know. So she did. I was gone for three years. I think the last time I was home before I got out of the service, I gave her a ring. Well, I only saw her just a couple of times when I'd go home on leave. It was about once a year. I got out in January. Went in January 6th, and got out on January 6th. Three years to the day. I got out January and married in May, I think...I don't remember. (laughter) I wanted to get married. I wanted to have kids. And she was cute. (laughter) I would say I was passionately in love with her at that time.
Francis

Where we lived wasn’t conducive to prejudice. ‘Cause we lived with the blacks. When we grew up, we were the only white family in the whole block. To us, a black was like us, that’s where we all lived. So we figured we were the same color. Southern Italians are very dark-complected. They’re kind of frightening in a way. Scared the hell out of Genevieve when we were in Southern Italy.

You’d have to have lived in those times, really. Because people that lived in an Italian community were very conscious of their Italian heritage. We lived in this area of town where there’s only one street that has Italians. The street where we live, there were none. We never got a feeling like we were prejudiced against, that we were any different than anybody else. And our parents never led us to believe anything else either. I always call it the Southside Complex, because when I got old enough to mingle with them, they were very very conscious of being different, felt they were discriminated against. At the time, I recall that the kids in high school used to think that maybe I thought I was better than they, or stuck up or something. But it was only because I didn’t know any of ‘em. And they thought that since I was Italian, you know, that I was like them. Well, I was, except that I didn’t have this inferiority complex.

Even though we didn’t live there didn’t mean we weren’t exposed to the Italian ways. Italian funerals were kind of wailing things. Screaming. Grief-stricken. Irrational. The body lay in an open casket in the home. It was not in the funeral home. They stayed up all night. They sure did.

On the Southside, there was talk of the affascinata The affascinata means to jinx someone. I don’t think my mother believed in it. I don’t think my dad did, either. I think I learned about the affascinata from other older Italians, actually.

I don’t know what was happening on the Southside as far as a birth goes. I was born at home. All my siblings were born at home except Cristine. Cristine was born in Methodist Hospital. My mother was embarrassed when she found out she was pregnant with Cristine. A matter of fact, nobody believed she really was pregnant, because she was
kind of heavy-set, anyway. She knew she was pregnant, but nobody would believe her because you never did see any evidence of it. The doctor that delivered the baby was also a customer in our store. She told her that if she were pregnant that she would deliver the baby for free. Well, she did. Mother was kind of apologetic about being pregnant. We were all surprised. I don’t know how they practiced birth control. I assumed they used condoms. There weren’t any of those other types of birth control available then.

From the time I grew up until I went to Italy to visit, I always thought, I’m Italian first and foremost. Then after I went to Italy, and I came home, I decided I’m not really Italian at all because I went over to Italy and they treated me like I was an American. So that’s what I am. When we were in Rome, they had an ad in the paper, the Rome paper, that said no Calabrians need apply for a job. They had no use for Southern Italy. So you can really understand how the mafia came into vogue. ‘Cause they were even in worse shape than we were.

Mary Terese

I think Des Moines was really a good place to live. We never locked our doors. We were never scared, you know, of anything ever happening. We always knew that we had to stay away from the Southside because there was a lot of strange things that went on over here\(^4\). There was a lot of murders down here. Sam can tell you, his dad saw several people murdered. They would never turn anybody in. I mean, that’s the way things went.

Most people used the street car to get around. We always had a car but a lot of

\(^4\)Mary Terese has lived on the Southside for over thirty years now. Her husband Sam was born and raised on the Southside. After her father’s death, they moved to the Southside near his parents. To this day, Mary Terese does not consider herself a Southside Italian.
people didn’t. My mother, she loved her truck more than anything. It was an old panelled truck. Mostly, us kids walked. Well if we went to the movie or anything, we walked. Today, nobody would think of walking anywhere. Everything is so spread out.

The only time I remember coming down here to the Southside when I was young, was to visit this lady. She was a widow, and she had two or three kids, very very poor, and my mother used to bring her a lot of groceries at different times. Other than that, I don’t remember, we never hardly ever came over to the Southside. Most of the Italian people that my mother associated with lived on the west side or north of where we lived, Francis Avenue area. Other than Aunt Rosie, my dad’s sister, no one lived on the Southside. I don’t know why none of my mother’s family ever lived down on the Southside. I don’t know why most Italian people settled down here. I never could understand why we didn’t.

There was a lot of grocery stores, barber shops around here. I think most of the Italian people around here worked for the railroad, back in those days. Sam’s dad was a baker for many years. Then I don’t know how he became a barber. I don’t know if they had barber schools back then. Probably not, ‘cuz he didn’t know how to cut hair.

Most of the young kids on the Southside, well, they would be my age now, could all talk Italian. None of us ever could, because my mother didn’t use it at home. It was mostly English, unless they wanted to say something that they didn’t want us to know.

When we got older, my mother belonged to this club that was called the Columbus Club. They used to have big dances and cooked big, big dinners. It was a money making thing. They used to have a big dinner and dance in the basement of that theater. They used to have an orchestra. My mother always went. My dad never went to those. My mother loved to dance and she used to go to all of these things. My Dad never cared that she went. He wasn’t funny like a lot of Italian men. My sister-in-laws, they don’t

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44During an interview with Lucille, Michael’s wife, she mentioned that her mother-in-law used to tell her that if you had your choice between a car and a house, take the car because it gave you freedom.
believe in going anywhere without their husbands. If I had to wait for my husband, then I would never go anywhere.

During the war, we didn’t even want people to know we were Italian. In fact, my dad, his name wasn’t John Porti on the door of the grocery store. It was P-O-R-T. That’s what he went by because he didn’t want people to know he was Italian. I think that was the reason. There was a lot of... it’s just like black people, there was a lot of discrimination in those days. Well, because you were Italian. Well, I mean they’d call ya names... Dago, wop. I don’t know where those words came from. During the war it wasn’t popular to be Italian or Japanese because, you know, Italy-Mussolini, he was at war against the United States. So was Japan and Germany. Well the Germans though, I don’t know that they were, you know... but uh, we always felt discriminated against a lot.

I didn’t get married ‘til I was 27 and I think my mother was silently pushing for me to get married. She wanted me to get married, but there was a lot of different families that asked my mother if their son could marry me. But my mother didn’t believe in that kinda stuff. “No,” she just said to them, “She’ll marry who she wants to marry.” She never encouraged us to marry Italian. But we all married Italian except for John.

My mother was a very modern woman. She wasn’t like the typical Italian mother. She let me go with my friends to Clear Lake. At Clear Lake, we’d be in the water all day, swimming, or we’d go fishing, boating, and every night we went to the dance. We always had a lot of fun.

I think I had a lot of independence. My cousin Margaret and I used to go out a lot when we were still single. My dad every once in a while, he’d ask my mother, “What do they do when they go out at night?”, and she says, “They’re not doing anything. They’re just having a good time.” My mother wanted us to have a good time. My mother wasn’t strict with us like most Italian people, you know down here on the Southside. My sister-in-laws never got to go two feet away from their house. My mother trusted me absolutely.

Mother never told us anything about the facts of life. I was ten years old when I
first started my period. I was petrified. I had no idea what was going on when I first started bleeding. I was just petrified. It happened at school. I just ran home, and I was just scared to death. I dunno what I thought but I knew I wasn’t gonna ask my mother. My mother, they didn’t talk about things like that. The only thing she ever said to me was, “Don’t let a boy ever touch you.” Then I had it in the back of my head, if they touch me, I’m gonna have a baby or something. My next door neighbor happened to be home when I came home from school. Well, this very nice neighbor lady, she explained to me what had happened. We never had kotex or anything like that. Just rags. We’d wash ‘em, cook ‘em, boil ‘em in lye, clean ‘em and, we’d just pin ‘em on the inside of our pants. My mother didn’t even explain to us about the hygiene part of it. I just figured it out like anything else, just know by doing. We never had nice bras. That’s why we all got so floppy. We never bought nice brassieres like you girls have now. We used to buy ‘em at the dime store and there was no cup, just a thing that kinda “squashed” ya, and they were very uncomfortable things.

We didn’t date. I mean we liked certain boys and we used to have dances but I never dated in high school. Probably nobody asked me. (laughter) This group of girls used to go to movies and we belonged to the Choral Club. It was a Catholic Club. Father, what was his name, an Italian priest, used to have the Catholic Action Club. Right across from the Cathedral they had those buildings, you know, it was in the upstairs. And then during the war, they had dances every Sunday night for the soldier, sailors, whatever. We used to just go out ourselves. Go out to dinner or go to a movie.

I don’t think Michael ever had a date with anyone. And Francis, there was one girl that he liked. He never dated. I think he used to go sit on her steps or porch or whatever. And then Genevive. So Michael and Francis really were the girlfriend sharks. (laughter) Ask Lucille and Michael about their courtship. He didn’t like to go out to eat. I don’t think he ever took her to a movie. He basically came back from the war and married her. None of my brothers or sisters dated much. Sam had to take Joanne to her prom. Does that tell you something? (laughter) How exciting our lives were then.
When I got a little older, we used to, I suppose you'd say, date. There would be a bunch of us. It wouldn't be that same group of girls. This was when I was older and some of them were married. There were five or six couples of us that would go to dinner and dancing. We never went separately with anyone. We just went in groups.

I was engaged once before Sam. Now, what was his first name? Isn't that terrible? Anyway, I don't know. He gave me a diamond and then I found out. I thought I was in love with him at the time and then I found out that he had an old girlfriend that he had gotten pregnant. She was pregnant. So, I broke off the engagement. I was upset about it at first but after I thought about it I think I just got engaged because I thought I should get married at the time. My parents didn’t get really upset. We used to know a lot of men who were comutos. I can’t tell you what it means. There were a lot of men who wanted me. Mike M, I should have married him. I would be a really rich lady today. His dad asked my mother if he could marry me. A lot of men came over and asked my mother if their sons could marry me. My mother didn’t believe in that. She always said that it was up to me.

Then I had one guy. Angela S, we were really really good friends and her mother wanted me to marry one of her sons. She didn’t care which one. I had never met John. He was in the navy for years and his mother wrote to him about me. Anyway, he used to send me flowers. I had never met him but he used to send me flowers at Easter and different things. I’ll never forget when he came home on leave. I didn’t know he was coming over. I was in the kitchen, I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the floor and here he comes down the hall. A person I’ve never seen before and he asked me if I would marry him. (laughter) I almost bust out laughing. Here was this little short sailor. It was comical.

It was different than it is now. Kids today are too serious. We were just having a good time. We weren’t worrying about getting married and what not. I think in those days, Italian women were expected to get married. You never even entertained the thought about going to college. I mean you went to high school and that was okay for
education, but then you got married and had a family. Period. I thought I would marry eventually, but I never really thought about it. It wasn't on my mind all the time.

After I did marry, we lived with Sam's parents. That was typical, you know, until the couple saved enough money to buy a house or whatever. Back then, people didn't move into apartments like they do now.

Oh, Italian weddings are just a lot of fun. They do a lot of Italian dances. "The Tarantella." They always had a band. Not at my wedding, we had a dinner. Anyway, it is just a lot of dancing. The food, almost every wedding those days that you went to, the menu was the same. There was a ham sandwich in a bun, sometimes they put butter, sometimes not, and cake and ice cream. The ice cream was a little slice that was wrapped in tissue and in the middle of it was either a bell or something. Way back, like when Aunt Laura got married, they used to throw money with the candies, throw money out on the floor for the kids. Everybody went to the weddings, you know. The kids didn't stay at home. The kids were there. Everybody was there.

When my brother Francis got married, do you remember Papa John, he was so funny. When Dick married Mary, the oldest boy, her family was old fashioned, it was a fixed-up wedding. And they believed, the groom's family paid for everything. But then when Francis married Genevive, then Papa John said the bride had to pay for everything. So he said no matter who gets married, he'd have to pay for all the weddings. I don't know if my mother had to pay for part of it, or not. I don't remember. I don't think they had a big wedding either. I think they had a big dinner. I can't remember. Lucille and Michael had a breakfast. She had a really small wedding. Well, I think that today, people all try to out do each other with these lavish, big dinners and they try to out do with the big huge buffet and all those cookies and all this other stuff.

We were all born at home except Cristine. Cristine was the only one born in a hospital. I remember Joanne and Cristine. I remember Joanne because we didn't even know my mother was going to have a baby. Joanne was born on a Sunday. My mother sent us all to a movie. When we came home this Mrs. Costanzo, a midwife, was there.
We knew when she was there, we knew it meant a baby. We would love it when mother would have a baby because people always brought you chickens. They’d bring you chickens. Sometimes live chickens. And Hershey bars. (laughter) Chickens were to make soup (more laughter). I don’t know what the Hershey bars were for, but we always got so excited because we knew we would get them. We came home and there was a baby. What did we know? They wore those big dresses, you didn’t know when anyone was pregnant. Nobody ever talked about it.

I do remember the day she told me about Cristine. I was scrubbing the kitchen floor on Pleasant Street and she told me she was pregnant. She said she didn’t know how it even happened. (laughter) And, of course, I didn’t know how it had happened, either (more laughter) But, she was very upset about it. She said she was too old. And one of her friends, oh, I will never forget this - Anna, she wanted to have a shower, a baby shower for my mother and I thought my mother was going to throw her out of the house. (laughter) She said it was just an accident that she got pregnant.

One morning, I think it was either the day before or the morning of the funeral, my mother came home and she told us to get dressed up and she took us down, ‘cause we were living on 21st Street, so she took us down to Pleasant Street. We just all went in to look at my grandmother’s body. I don’t think we went to the funeral or anything. Nobody went to a funeral home back then. They were all in the house. I suppose there was an undertaker but the body was always at home. When Uncle Gene died, I remember him in the dining room. People stayed up all night. Wakes were always two nights. All night. I don’t know why. It was dumb. I can remember the wake but I don’t remember going to the funeral Mass.

You’ve never gone to a real Italian funeral. Oh, boy. There used to be women... (laughter)...there used to be certain women who would go to funerals and wakes and cry and do this whining singsong thing, wailing and saying different things in Italian (imitate sound of Italian). I couldn’t understand what they were saying. Aunt Lucille would probably remember. But they do this whiny singsongy thing and scream and cry
and holler and carry on. What did they used to call these women? They were like professional mourners.

Say the family is sitting there and a certain lady friend would come in and go up to the coffin. She would start in in this thing in Italian and she would say something and then the wife or female relative of the deceased would say something and it was always kind of singsongy type thing. Someone was always serving coffee and donuts all night long. There was always food connected with it.

The mourning period was a year. They wore black and when my mother was around, you couldn’t play the radio. When my grandma died, we weren’t allowed to have a Christmas tree that year because we were still in mourning. There was no celebrating the holidays or anything for a whole year and all the women wore black. We used to go out to my grandparents’ grave all the time.

They were very emotional. Back in those days, they were. I don’t know what types of funerals other people had. A good friend of the family was Irish. The Irish wakes are something else. They kind of celebrate. They are just the opposite of the Italian people. Of course, the Italian people are noted for being very emotional. I think I prefer the Irish ones, outside of the drinking. I think they made better sense. Death is not supposed to be a sad thing it is supposed to be how do they say it, you’re not really gone, it is just your new life.

On the Southside, I think they’d say malata d'occhio, the evil eye. My sister-in-laws believe in that a lot. Oh, yeah, they still, you know, think they’ve been, you know, “I bet I’ve been fasci.” Well, Aunt Emma, if someone would bring in a new baby then she would always go corne, corne (with gesture & laughter). Your pinky and index finger straight with the middle two folded down with the thumb covering them. Yeah, she’d say, forme fascia that means protection against the evil eye.

Now my sister-in-laws, they always said whenever they were affascinata, it was because they were beautiful. For instance, if I was talking to you and I would say that you were beautiful, then they’d go home and say, “She put the fasci on me because I’m
so beautiful.” My mother-in-law could do the affascinata. You had to learn it from someone else at Midnight on Christmas Eve. And you had to learn, there are different prayers and you have to yawn three times and say these different prayers. I remember watching my mother-in-law do it. Anyone in the family, a nephew or niece, anyone would call and say, “Aunt Catherine, I’m affascinata, would you do the fascin’?” Then she’d sit there and say all these prayers and then she would yawn and say all these prayers. (laughter)

I thought it was nuts! My mother didn’t really believe in it. I mean, they would say, “fome fasci” but, nothing else. But my sister-in-law would call up and she would say “Yeah, you were affasci and it was by a boy or by a girl.” They always thought it was a girl who was affassin them because they thought they were so beautiful. Like I said, Aunt Emma used to say “fome fasci” or “corne, corne”, but it wasn’t serious. Like we do it now, when we play cards. We put the hex on the cards (laughter).

John

Des Moines wasn’t really a big town. Several high schools. Of course, when you are younger you kind of divide things into where your friends lived. None of my friends lived in the area I did, which was right by the downtown district. The more affluent of them lived out on the West side residential areas and all the Italians lived on the Southside and I was isolated from them. Most of them could speak a little Italian and they were sort of clannish because they were Italian. And they didn’t quite know how to handle me. I was Italian but I wasn’t from the Southside which made me sort of suspect, so to speak. So I didn’t really find much in common with the Italians. But it sort of astounded me that all these Italians all lived in the same place and didn’t get around town more.

One fond memory of Des Moines is the Fair. Every year when the big State Fair in Iowa in Des Moines opened up, I remember my mother would fry us up a sack of chicken early in the morning and off we would go to the State Fair. We’d usually saved
up a couple of dollars to take. It was a big deal and I enjoyed it especially because we
didn’t waste any money. We didn’t waste any money buying a ticket to get in. We
snuck in over the fence. That was very popular in those days. We’d spend all day at the
Fair which was all the rides and everything that goes on at the State Fair. We’d usually
go the day that had the automobile competition.

Des Moines was just a medium size small town. When I was a kid, I got to know
the areas that interested me, the areas around the river because most of my summers, my
free time I would spend down on the river fishing, angling around the river, watching
them fish. And also the downtown area, I got to know pretty well. The fact that we lived
within walking distance and every Sunday afternoon about noontime, we’d get a little
money from my mother and we’d walk downtown. Walk around the movie houses, see
which one we wanted to spend our dime to get into it.

As I recall there were five or six movie houses spread over a several block area.
And sometimes if there were two good movies, we’d go to two movies. We got to know
the downtown area quite well. And the public market, big public market at that time. I
suspect there still is. But it was a fairly small town with a big Italian population and it
had a lot of insurance industry. The area we lived had a lot of apartment houses where
these young girls would come to the city to work in those insurance offices and they’d
live in those apartment buildings around there. We had trolley cars. Electric. It was big
sport when you got a little older to run out and go pull the cord on the trolley and get it
off the line and trolley would stop and the guy would get out and he’d be all mad and yell
at you. He had to get the gadget back on the line again before he could go. And they
had some cars, some public transportation, later on there were a few that ran on rails. Big
sport to collect bottle caps and put them on the rails and the cars would go over them and
flatten them.

Halloween was always a big time. You didn’t go around and collect candy. You
entered the real spirit at that time doing tricks on the people in the neighborhood. Oh,
you’d soap the windows. I don’t think they do that anymore. Soap’s hard to get off the
windows. We'd turn over their garbage cans. Some pretty mean tricks. I remember a trick we played one time. It was in the fall of course, and a lot of leaves around. We raked up a big pile of leaves in the middle were rocks. Sure enough a car hit it. We thought this was hilarious. And usually Halloween night about the time it would get real dark, there would be police cars around and flash lights up the alley. It got quite exciting.

I had no reason to go over to the Southside. All my school chums were on the north side of town. I don't know why it was called the Southside, maybe because it was south of the river. I didn't feel quite comfortable over there because everyone was speaking Italian and I just felt sort of out of place. There were stores and shops. It was pretty segregated. They had a grade school over there which was all Italian. Even the kids that lived over there that weren't Italian usually would learn to speak a little bit Italian or at least to cuss in Italian. And I always got the idea, at least when I was younger, the Italian kids from the Southside sort of resented the fact that I was Italian and I didn't live on the Southside. Everybody, all the Italians, lived on the Southside. No, they didn't. None of my relatives lived on the Southside. Never thought of that before but they didn't.

I don't really think at the time that there was a real Mafia in Des Moines. There was certainly no violence. Although there may have been more than we figured. Based downtown, I'm sure there was prostitution and liquor going on. And cigarettes. At that time all cigarettes had to be stamped. You could make money smuggling cigarettes. I think my uncle did some of that too. I remember when I worked in the grocery store, that was one of my jobs. I had to paste these stamp on every package of cigarettes. It was quite a chore. But I don't think the Mafia was real active. Pretty borderline, you see we

45For a good understanding of the difference between the Des Moines neighborhood and a classical “mafia” Italian American slum read William Foote Whyte's (1943) Street Comer Society. What really interested me concerning this work, is that Whyte spent three years living in the Italian slum district of an Eastern United States city. He lived with an Italian family, learned the language, and joined in neighborhood activities. He gained their trust, confidence and friendship and is able to present his research from their emic perspective.
were only a couple of hours from Chicago. It was very real. We had heard about it. Speculated about it. That sort of thing.

There used to be arranged marriages. Once when I came home from college for one weekend, my father asked me if I was going to be around that evening. I was puzzled at why he was interested, that he usually didn’t concern himself with that sort of stuff. I more or less came and went as I pleased. I told him that I didn’t know, as far as I know I hadn’t anything planned but I might. So he said, I should really stay around if I could. He didn’t say why. While he was talking to me like this, my sister Mary was there and sorta had a smirk on her face like she knew what it was all about. So anyway, that evening here comes a friend of his that I had seen before with his daughter. Very pretty, very pretty. Young Italian girl. She was very Italian. She spoke Italian quite fluently. Obviously their home was very old fashioned. But anyway, they came in and my father introduced us and we all sat around the living room for a few minutes. I got quite uncomfortable because my sister was there and she was smirking and I kind of got the idea of what’s going on here, you know. So at the first opportunity, I excused myself and left the house for the rest of the evening. Nothing was ever said about it actually. That was the only attempt and I don’t think my mother had anything to do with it. I think she was much more Americanized than he was.

I always got the idea that they were attempting to arrange a marriage for Mary Terese. The first attempt that went awry, I almost thought was arranged. And I always thought the marriage she made was half-way arranged. I’m not sure. I didn’t pay that much attention. I was self-centered. But I do remember why Mary Terese’s first engagement got called off. The story I got was that he had an illegitimate child that he was supporting and he felt he should tell her about it before they got married. I always thought that was nice of him because he could have just kept his mouth shut, you know. I’d have thought more of him for it. But she sort of got hysterics and called the whole thing off and that was the end of that. Painful to her. I got the idea that this was what she was raised to do, get married and have babies. She was failing in the fact that she
didn’t even get married.

I was glad we didn’t live in the Italian community because it seemed to me that we couldn’t make a good living in the Italian community. They had a real problem because they thought they were different from anybody else. And I thought they weren’t doing themselves any favors. They were sort of supersensitive about the fact that someone might discriminate against them or something like that. They’d be better off if they got out into the community. The last few years of high school, I declared a lot more pride in my Italian heritage. Mostly that was because my friends, and a lot of them weren’t Italians, they’d go over to my house and my mother would feed them and they’d rave about the food. They all wanted to come over to my house and eat the Italian food. Which made me quite proud of my Italian food. Funny thing to be proud about, isn’t it?

**Joey**

When I was a child, I never really thought about Des Moines much. It was there. I used to enjoy going down to the markets with my mom. It seemed like a big city to me. Which it was. We used to enjoy going down to the Southside ‘cause that’s where all the Italians lived. I remember going down to the Southside a couple times to visit my mom’s aunt[^46] that used to make us this bread that would fit in a bushel basket. That’s about the only time that we’d go down there. It was just different.

As kids, we didn’t go anyplace. We worked in the store. Oh, when we went fishing, we had the car. In the summertime, if we didn’t have work, Johnny and I would take our bikes and go down and drive or ride over to Grey’s Lake, or if we had to, we’d walk. Down and back. We’d walk wherever we had to go. Walked or take our bikes to, over the Des Moines River along 6th Avenue there to fish and Shanksmehr! Walking.

I did not perceive that I was seen as different because I was an Italian. Not at all.

[^46]: He is actually referring to his father’s sister who would have died when he was very young.
Don’t remember anybody ever making a disparaging remark or anything. At least not to me. See we never had that much contact with the Southside Italians, except down in the market area when we were buying.

I knew I wanted to marry Italian, and it just happened that one I fell in love with was an Italian. I don’t know why. (chuckle) I would have wished that my children had married Italians. I really don’t know why. ‘Cause my generation, racism was nothing to us. We really didn’t think about it or anything, but you just married in you own kind. It was better. It worked out better. Me, it’s worked out great. Of course, my wife is a unique individual. She treats me like a king. She does anything and everything for me. I try to do anything and everything for her. (chuckle) She’s got me spoiled rotten. My mother treated my father like a king, really I think she did. I just wanted to marry an Italian girl. And I hope that you marry an Italian boy. I don’t think my parents ever expressed anything about whether I should marry an Italian.

Joan

I never liked Des Moines. But as I looked back on it, it was a wonderful place to grow up. Because you were free. Living in Des Moines, when I was growing up, was almost like living in Carroll is today. There was a freedom there that no longer exists in Des Moines today. I could have walked, taken the streetcar, ridden my bicycle anywhere. And I did. With no thought of ever being hurt or attacked or mugged or anything. There was absolutely no fear. Maybe that was stupid on my part, but I think that’s the way all of us felt. And we had a lot of fun. We did a lot of things.

There was an Italian neighborhood on the Southside, but we were never a part of that. Our strong Italian community was our family...our cousins, aunts and uncles. And my mother’s friends. But most of her friends didn’t live on the Southside, either. We used to go down to the Southside because there was a woman who baked the bread in her outdoor oven and we used to buy bread. Or we would go to Graziano’s for things, but no, we really didn’t do a lot of socializing there. I had no reason to go there. I didn’t
really know a lot of people. Except my father's two nieces lived on the Southside. But we didn't go to their homes very often. They came to our house more.

I remember when they used to celebrate the feast of Corpus Cristi on the Southside. They used to walk all through the Southside, and they had periods where they had benediction and sing songs. A procession, I guess you'd call it. We would go down there. My mother was very religious in her way.

Some Italian parents were more strict, but I was never restricted. I knew my limits. But I think they were mostly self-imposed limits. But I was very good at kind of twisting Mary Terese around my little finger, too. Mostly because I was such a pest. She'd be glad to get rid of me. I was a lot like you; you're a lot like me.

It never occurred to me that I wouldn't marry an Italian. I don't know that I wouldn't have even considered marrying anyone but an Italian. That was just the way it was. Oh, I was a total innocent. Had no idea about sex. Up until the time I got married. Had no idea. You didn't see it in movies. You didn't read about it in books. No one ever told me. All I was ever told was that you start periods, but there was no why or wherefore. I really didn't get told the facts of life, ever. And didn't question that I wasn't either to tell you the truth.

So, when I got married it was a shock in some ways, but yet, it wasn't really. I knew something was going to happen, but I didn't know what. But still at the same time, it didn't scare me or frighten me, either.

My mother didn't even refer to her pregnancy with Cristine. I think because she was so embarrassed by it that it just didn't come up. In fact, I wasn't aware for a long time that she was going to have a baby. My mother was heavy enough that you couldn't tell anyway. She didn't wear maternity clothes or anything like that. She was so embarrassed from the fact that it was going to take away from her first grandchild being born.

I just think my mother was not prepared emotionally to have another child. She was, after all, forty-two years old. She thought she was done. And she just wasn't
equipped mentally, I don’t think. I just don’t think she wanted to deal with it. So a lot of
it, most of it, fell to Mary Terese. As Cristine got older, I watched her a lot. Actually, I
enjoyed having her, but then she was an excuse ‘cause I used to take her to the movies
and I was more than willing as long as I could get out. If I took Cristine along, that was
fine. Yes, we always did have a very close relationship.

I remember when Uncle Gene died. They had his body in the front room. Marian
wanted me to stay. I wasn’t going to stay. They would sit up all night. The whole
family. They would take turns sitting up with Aunt Emma around them. I remember
women dressed in black. But they’d be relatives. Or close friends. No, I think they loved
funerals. Except for Emily. Emily would stay as far away from the funeral as she could.
I think they loved funerals. When Uncle Gene died. I was there. I can remember Aunt
Emma. “He’s still warm. Maybe he’s ok. Oh, God.” He died during the middle of the
day. I was there with Marian. We were playing. All I know is that he was sick in bed
for a long time. But I really don’t know what it was. It was probably cancer. It was
very hush-hush. And cancer wasn’t spoken. That word wasn’t spoken back then.

There was some women that I would hear my parents or Rose say that had the evil
eye. I think my mother believed this on the outer fringes of it. My father believed it.
Oh, yeah. They would do the knock on wood. Corne, corne a lot. Oh, it’s where you
put your two middle fingers down and your index finger and little finger are sticking out.
And your thumb. Corne, corne. Supposed to ward off the evil spirits.

I don’t ever recall going to a doctor. My mother used to take care of us herself.
If we had a sore throat, it was Vick’s on the throat and woolen rag wrapped around it.
We used to be given hot lemonade with honey when you were sick with a bad cold or
sore throat. I’m sure I did, ‘cause I’m vaccinated. But I don’t ever recall ever being sick.
I got the measles and the mumps. Didn’t go to a doctor. My mother, even when she had
Cristine, didn’t really go to a doctor. She went to the hospital. We used to have this
woman that lived across the street who was an anesthesiologist. She was an M.D. I think
she more or less took care of mother. And when the time came, helped in the delivery.
Cristine

Well, on the Southside, I felt part of a real neighborhood. Pleasant Street was not a real neighborhood because it was apartments and I don’t think people related as well. I think people on the Southside did a lot more, you know. I had all my brother-in-law’s relatives. His father was next door. His brother and sister were down the street. I would do things like go to the Little League park and play with kids we knew there. It was more neighborhood and Pleasant street was less than a neighborhood. In terms of families. There were more families there. I don’t know where all the Italians lived. I thought it was more where Lucille’s parents were. I loved where Lucille’s parents lived. I loved that house. It used to always smell like wine.

Sometimes I thought my family was, especially my brothers, somewhat uncharacteristically Italian. But there was a somewhat flamboyant, noisy, loud argumentative airs to them. Dad was kind of a loner. And I think sometimes my brothers are a little like loners, too. I only say this because I have views of the men on the Southside as being, you know, wanting to drive flashy cars, being kind of sentimental types. But I think that maybe that went along with a certain social-economic status or class like I’ve seen in other places.

And my mother wasn’t like some of the Southside Italian women. Oh, no, she was too smart to believe in the evil eye and something like that, but I could be wrong. I don’t think she believed in that. All I remember is that she taught me that little prayer. I don’t think she tended to be fanciful. Affascinata? I never believed in stuff like that, but I have heard of it. It was never a big deal that I remember when I was growing up. I don’t think my mother believed in it. Part of it was I think good religious education. I can’t imagine my parents either one of them, my father because of his cynicism and my mother because of her practicality, putting credence in stuff like that.

Each of the family members makes some effort to distinguish the difference between themselves and the Southside Italians. One gets the feeling that their parents
must have made similar comparisons. I have always felt that my mother's family did not care for the intensity of the Italians on the Southside and the overt expression of their ethnicity. Without understanding why, I was always quick to tell people that my family is not a part of the Southside Italians and I was not born or raised there. Some of the reasoning behind the Porti's attitude could be based on campanilismo, which refers to a sense of community and common feelings shared by members of the same village -- all those who lived within the song of the church bell. The majority of villagers from Belsito who settled in Des Moines did not live on the Southside. The majority of the Southsiders were from in and around Terravecchia, located in a different region of Calabria. Calabrians are known for their interregional disputes and I think that the Southsiders versus the non-Southsiders rivalry is residual of a long history of fighting.

47 In doing this research, I have learned that this is not true. My father's family first moved to the Southside when they came to Des Moines.
DEATH AND DYING

“She was the focal point of the family. Family kind of fell apart when she died.”

Does ethnicity influence the response of an individual to illness, death and aging? From the account of their mother’s death, we are able to explore how this specific family goes against many of the ethnic norms in Des Moines concerning funerals and death. Does this reflect personality of the family members or is it an indication of the Americanization of the family? On the other hand, much within the tradition of Italian immigrants, they were determined to nurse their mother at home, regardless of the sacrifice.

Michael

Naturally you don’t pay too much attention to your mother, I suppose. If she doesn’t feel good, she doesn’t feel good. You don’t know why. The first symptom she had was, she would go to take a bottle, I don’t know how many times it’s happened, but there’s our stove right next to our sink. And she’d take a big thing of water to put on the stove, and she’d slip and spill. Splash. And then she wasn’t feeling good, and wasn’t feeling good. And she went to see the doctor. He noticed that her toes of her shoes was getting worn. So the “why” hit him. He wanted her to see a specialist. Francis knew this good doctor, a little Italian guy. He diagnosed her as having lateral anastrophic sclerosis, Lou Gehrig’s disease. And diagnosis to the death was a couple of years.
[Lu: She really started tripping in the grocery store.]
She was tripping in the store...

[Lu: She was tripping like...when she’d be walking, especially on those wood slat floors in the grocery store. Michael, did she go to Omaha before she went to the italian doctor or after?]
After.

[Lu: Ok, I went with her to Lucianno. And he’s the one who told her that she had the neurological...]
Yeah, and he’d want somebody to...

[Lu: And he told her then that’s what she had, and she must have gone to...] I think he said he’d never seen a case of it.

[Lu: She must have gone to Omaha to confirm it.]
Yeah.

[Lu: ‘Cause Lucianno told her that day that I was with her...]
That’s what she went there for was to get...

[Lu:...that she didn’t have more than two years to live. And she lived just short of two years.]

When she was diagnosed. Oh, it was like she was unutterably tired. Just, she just didn’t feel good. She just felt terrible. Did it occur to me what her death might mean. Well, in my head, you know, she’s still here, and she’s still living. You don’t make the connection, at least I didn’t. She had a sort of an extracurricular deal selling damaged goods from grocer’s wholesale. Sacks of flour get ripped, she’d buy ‘em at a greatly reduced price and call up Italians that baked a lot. Anyhow, she had several, eight or ten of ‘em. She’d call ‘em up when she had a deal. Like fifty pounds of flour for half price from what was at the store. And she made a profit and they were tickled to death. She

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48Because Lucille aided in the nursing of Lena during her illness, I welcomed her input during this final interview.
continued to work as long as she could. She drove.

[Lu: *When she got to the point that she couldn’t drive, she just didn’t go anyplace that I can remember.*]

Oh, she was bedridden just a few months, I think. It was a slow, steady, debilitating sickness. First, when she got nervous, the voice would fade, like mine does now. Yeah, she’d go to lose it. God, it’s so hard to remember when different things happened.

[Lu: *Walking was the first thing.*]

Yeah, she had trouble walking, that’s the first thing. But later on, the voice went.

[Lu: *The voice. She could always use fingers ‘cause that’s how she communicated with us. She wrote on a board...*]

Well, that was when she was really gone.

[Lu: *Yeah, well, hey...No, that was most of the time. Yeah. She could because when she would talk to us, we couldn’t understand her, and she would always write it. You know those flip pads...She always kept that by her side. We all took care of her when she was sick.*]

Well, the nurse lived in one of the apartments upstairs that took care of her shots, stuff like that. Other than that.

[Lu: *Your mother was in school. So during the day, Mary Terese and I would...Well, Cristine was in school. Somebody was always over there.*]

Yeah, I watched her take her last breath. Genevieve was in the kitchen. She just took a deep breath and didn’t breath for maybe a minute and then took another one, then the last one.

The wake wasn’t three days.

[Lu: *I think then we were the first Italian family that had a one-night wake. ‘Cause we didn’t like...Didn’t want to...I’m sure we were, but Mary Terese, what did she say about that? I mean that was always two nights, and I’m positive we were the first, the first Italian or even other than, other than that...*]
It was, it was also down on Grand, wasn’t it, Lu?

[Lu: Yeah. Dunn’s Funeral Home. And of course, everybody used to use Brien, Caldwell-Brien Funeral Home.]

I made a lot of the decisions. I was also the executor of the will. It was nothing. Everything was left to my father. There was nothing to do. In fact, when she died, when he died, he was broke, wasn’t nothing to do there, either. Except for a couple dollars left at the bank. Divided up, that’s all there was. Hey, when I say, what was in the checking account, that’s all the money there was. Spent it all on doctors, my dad did. No, my mother had, the two of them had together, I don’t recall. It wasn’t a very large sum, I’ll guarantee it. She’d been doctored for heavily, for, and he had... Yeah. Initially, Mary Terese took on the responsibility of Cristine.

[Lu: She lived right across the street. In our apartment, in the apartment house, and this...]

By her choice, I think...

[Lu: And just then shortly afterwards, your mother got married. See Joan, your mother, was there until then. When Joan, your mother, got married, Mary Terese and Sam and Kathy moved over to the big house.]

He was, how would you say it... ‘hypochondriac’. That’s what he was, I think. After Mom was gone, Mary Terese took care of him. Yeah. She had to cook his meals. Lucille cooked a lot of ‘em, too, I suppose. They got in, they got into a fight. I don’t know about what. And he wanted Cristine.

[Lu: I never really knew exactly what happened. Never actually knew.]

He just said to me, he wanted me to take Cristine. So I took Cristine. Well, they were fussing so much at the time, I thought it best to get her out of there, that’s what. Out here, no.

[Lu: Yeah. That was just before he died. When he was at our house, he said that Michael was trying to poison him. And when he went to Mary Terese’s, and I don’t know if he said Mary Terese was trying to poison him or what. But anyway, he was
there, I don’t know if he was there a month or two months, I don’t even remember how long he was there...]

No. I knew he was a little bit irrational, accusing her of always trying to poison him and stuff like that. He hated Mary Terese. It was terrible.

[Lu: No, that wasn’t then, was it?]
Yeah...A little after the tracheotomy.

[Lu: No, he didn’t have that before... ‘Cause he had the tracheotomy when he was at our house.]

Well, yeah. He never actually stayed at our house. He slept over there, didn’t he? I don’t remember.

When my mother was really sick, she went to Omaha. Aunt Emma volunteered to go down and stay with her for the day or two. I drove ‘em down and left ‘em. And got a room for Aunt Emma through the hospital down there. And when she got back, my mother wanted to give her, reimburse her for her expenses. For, mostly just her room. She offered her fifty dollars or whatever it was. Might not even have been that much. Wasn’t very much. And Aunt Emma said, “No, no.” She didn’t want anything. Insisted that she wasn’t going to take anything, but she did take the check. My mother had died, and I was cleaning up my duties as executor, and I can’t sign off the, there was a lien against the estate for the amount of the check. I paid it but I was, I was absolutely amazed. And this was several weeks, at least. If not months after her death.

[Lu: Months.]
A long time.

[Lu: Trying to figure out when she even wrote a check.]

Yeah. If she wanted the money, why didn’t she come to me and say, “You’re the executor, here’s the check.” I went to the bank, and I didn’t know what my mother had written. I went down there, and went to the teller, and says, “Want to close out Lena Porti’s account.” And with the signed paper that said I was the executor, she gave me the money and closed the account. She had made no attempt to cash it. I don’t know why.
But it went the lien route, I don’t know.

[Lu: You know, evidently, you put things out of your mind because, I can not remember how long Dad was in the nursing home. See, he couldn’t talk. He’d ring a bell when he wanted me. He’d be up half of the night, couldn’t sleep, and kept getting sleeping pills, and sleeping this. Take the stuff so long and it doesn’t do any good. Sleep during the day, and, um, I can’t even remember.]

Yeah, except that he wanted to go to Bishop Drum. Like I say, he said, I was poisoning him, Mary Terese was poisoning him. He went there, and he didn’t like it there, either. There was no place that you could have taken him that he would have liked. ‘Cause like I say, he was, at that condition, I imagine that’s pretty traumatic. The hole way here, and breathing in and out of this hole. And your phlegm from your throat bubbles. And then you have to get a syringe and clean it all out. I did that a lot of times.

[Lu: We have that, I still got it. That little suction machine.]

Wasn’t it just a rubber...

[Lu: That was the same thing we used on your mother. With your mother, it was convenient because there were nurses living in the home. In the apartment upstairs. And the one nurse, well, there were two of them. Actually three. But the one, the one in particular, used to come down and give her any of her medication that she had to have. So that was convenient then. With, Dad, like I say, he didn’t have any medication other than cleaning this and suctioning and feeding him through a tube. You just have to put his food through a blender and feed it through a, with a little syringe-type thing. And then, so there was no medication, other than the sleeping medication for him.]

Did we part ways soon after mother’s death? Not, to any excessive degree. We all, we all kind of gone our own way, anyhow. It didn’t change things. Didn’t accelerate. No difference. And then Dad died in 1960. Seven years later. After Mom, seven years, I don’t know. It was like we lost seven years. I don’t recall.
Francis

The thing I remember the most about my mother’s illness is that she used to have a blackboard by her. Anytime she wanted to communicate, she’d use the blackboard. But that was the only way. And I can also remember her when she was in a wheelchair, she was still cooking. Can you imagine?

When she was sick, she was a lot more appreciative of her family, I think. I think a lot more sentimental about it. She was never anybody that could kiss one of her kids or show any kind of affection for them at all. My wife was never that way, either. And my aunts were not that way. My Aunt Emma was very affectionate. So was my Aunt Laura. Even with her nephews and nieces.

From the time she was diagnosed to the time she died was approximately a year and a half. I wasn’t around. She was at home all the time. She never went into the hospital. They asked my brother Michael, if they wanted them to use any life supports, and she had told him, “No.” She wrote it on the blackboard. So they didn’t. But I know it was a miserable death. I wasn’t there when she died, I was in the service. Gen had come home because Mom was terminal. And it was just a matter of days, they wouldn’t let me stay away from the post that long. So I had to go back. I think I was back two days when they told me my mother, she had died.

Michael did all the funeral arrangements. Michael and my dad. Well, it was a shock when she died. I remember that initially. ‘Cause, you know, you don’t think of terms of mortality when you’re my age. What was I, thirty years old? So, but I do remember when she finally did die that I cried. I was alone and I was in Missouri at the post and I remember crying. But you know, funny thing about the funeral was none of my brothers and sisters ever cried. Isn’t that odd? I know I didn’t, and I didn’t notice any of them either.

She had a huge wake. A huge funeral procession. She knew so many people. My mother was really well liked. Outside her family, more so. She concentrated outside. My dad never showed any emotion. Not a bit. See all those decisions about Cristine and
the house took place when I was away. After her death, he was just like he always was. He was completely devoid of emotion. I don't even remember him even getting mad except mild. Like I told you before, he was always more concerned about my mother's tirades against us kids. In other words, he was always trying to pick up the pieces all the time.

My attitude toward dying? Way of life. I don't know anybody that's escaped it, so that's my answer to it. I wouldn't like it if I could no longer get around. I suppose that's the reason I exercise. I want a good quality of life. I know, don't necessarily have to be an old, old, old man, but the time I have got, I want to be healthy.

**Mary Terese**

I remember that she used to always have a lot of trouble with her throat. She would always loose her voice and we thought it was laryngitis. She lost her voice a lot and that is why they took her to Omaha. There was some Italian doctor, well-known doctor and he took her tonsils out. Michael took her and Emma, Aunt Emma went to visit her but I don't know if she stayed with her. Michael was with her. I don't remember. I know she did visit her there. So, they did that and that didn't do any good. The doctor still couldn't figure out what it was and then she would be walking and all of the sudden she would fall. And that is when they first diagnosed what was wrong with her. That she had this lateral sclerosis.

I think now they've got a little more control over it. I don't think they can cure it but people can live a lot longer with it. Why they would want to live with it, I don't know. Because they become very immobile. You can't do anything. They can't talk. They can't do anything.

Joanne had primary care for her. When she got really bad, everyone would take care of her. This is when she got really, really bad. We would stay over there, you know, helping Joanne. Joanne gave her her shots. I could not do that. I was living across the street in the apartment house. Kathy was two years old, it was her second
birthday the day before my mother died.

My mother died in ‘53 and my father died in ‘60. He died October 6th, I mean April 6th, Kathy was born on the 7th and my mother died on the 8th. So, one died the day before and one the day after.

Well, it was very hard on her because she had always been such an active person. It affects all of your senses and she lost the use of her legs and her voice. About two weeks before she died, she couldn’t even swallow a drop of water. But it never affected her hands. You know those things that kids have now that they can write on and you lift the sheet and clear it. That’s what she communicated with us with. She tried to talk and she’d get really really mad because we couldn’t understand what she was saying. But she would lose control.

I remember one time, I don’t know what Michael was doing, he was trying to clean her throat. She must have had some phlegm in her throat. She bit him, she almost bit his finger off. She really bit him but she had no control over it.

Well, my dad, you know, he was used to being the center of my mother’s universe. Her husband came first and then her kids. But when she got sick, he was shoved in the background and we had to listen to all his complaints about not feeling good, that his stomach hurt, you know. Francis and Genevive weren’t here. Johnny wasn’t here. Joey wasn’t here. So that was just Lucille, Joanne, I and Michael.

At first, she tried to continue with her normal activities at the wholesale houses. Later on, she didn’t go down that much. It got to a point where she couldn’t drive or anything. Before she died, she leased the store to Aunt Laura and Jimmy so they had the store. I would say they got the store in around ‘51 or ‘52. So, they had the store when Mother died. I ran the store with her before I got married. I got married and then I worked until I had Kathy. I couldn’t work and take care of Kathy. In those days, you didn’t send them to daycare or whatever. They didn’t have anything like that.

There was one point when there was one lady and she must have been psychic because we had to give her a piece of my mother’s clothing and she was going to pray
over it or something. It was my mother’s idea. I think at that point we were grabbing at straws. I don’t remember who that woman was or that it did any good.

No, she couldn’t talk or anything. She wanted to die. I mean, that is such an excruciatingly painful way to die. They used to give her hypos once in a while, but after a while they would wear off. She didn’t want any of her friends to see her when she was sick. We made a lot of them very, very mad. I understood that she didn’t want to see anyone. I mean you feel like you are on display. I remember when I was sick. The first year after I had my stroke, I wouldn’t talk to anyone on the phone and I didn’t want to see anyone. It’s almost like you are embarrassed to be sick. I can’t explain it to you.

The night she died, I remember I was upstairs on the third floor of Lucille’s apartment and from her living room looking down, I could see our house and the store. Somebody called. I think Michael was with her when she died. All of Lucille’s kids were with me, Cristine, and I was there with Kathy and I was looking out of the window and I saw them carry her body out. It was kind of a gloomy, rainy day. I felt really bad. I didn’t want Cristine to see, you know.

They took her to the funeral home. That changed gradually over the years. We never even considered having the funeral at home. I think Michael, I don’t know who else went with him, maybe my dad, they never asked me. I didn’t have anything to say about picking out the coffin, you know. I thought it would have been nice to been a part of that. But you didn’t ask Michael questions like that. You have got to remember that Michael was a very domineering person.

I never read the will. I never saw my mother’s will. You know who saw my mother’s will? Your dad. He went down to the courthouse. I don’t even know what it says. Is it still there? The same way with my Dad, when my Dad died. Michael took control and nobody had anything to say about it. No ifs, ands or buts. He just never considered anybody. That was just it. Whatever Michael said, if it was black, it was black, even if it was white, red or purple. If he said it was black, it would be black.

Aunt Laura and Emma were very upset because we were the first people who only
had a one night wake. That was a big disgrace because you are supposed to have a wake for two nights. We only had a wake for one night because Michael wanted it that way. She made us give away all her clothes except this one dress. It was the same dress that she wore to all of our weddings. That was the dress she wanted to be buried in.

Now I realize how young she was. When you are a kid, you think your mother is old. You know, no matter, you don’t think of the years. You just see your mother as an older person. And, uh, well, everybody, Margaret and Marian. Marian always thought she was going to die because, you know, Vi died when she was a young person. They say that if your parents have a long life span then you do, too. But it didn’t work out that way.

The biggest mistake I ever made in my whole life, at least one of them was that they talked Sam and I into moving in with Dad to take care of him. I made the big mistake of selling all my furniture to move in with Dad and his furniture. In the first place, in my mother’s will, she left all the furnishings in the house to your mother. Why she did that, I don’t know. Before I moved in, I talked to your mother and your father and I said, “Now, all this furniture is your, you take what you want now. Or forever hold your peace. You take it now or forget it.” And your Dad said that he didn’t want any of that junk. I think there was a few things your mother took like those crystal glasses. I think she still got. A few things. As far as the furniture, I think your mom and Dad lived with Billy’s mother and father for a while. Anyway, they didn’t want any of it.

So, I got rid of my furniture which was new and moved in with him. That is when the hell began. I don’t think it was even a year. You know, we would take Cristine with us if we would go somewhere. Just like we would take Kathy. I mean it was no big deal. If we went down to Sam’s mother’s for dinner, we would always ask him, but he would never go. Whatever I would cook, he wouldn’t like it. I don’t know how long we lived there when he sold us the house and he sold the apartment house to Michael and Lucille, but it was miserable.

When he got to the point when it got really bad, he went to live with Michael. I
used to take him to the doctor or whatever. While he was living with Michael, and I took him to the doctor, he used to tell me that Lucille was trying to poison him. He decided he wanted to live with us again. At that point we had to feed him through the tube through his nose to his stomach and we had to feed him from a blender and then pour it down this tube. He would get so mad and say that he couldn’t taste it and all of a sudden his stomach was full.

One day, he told me to call him a cab. I told him wherever he wanted to go, I would take him. Call him a cab and that it was none of my business. I called him a cab. He went down to Francis’ office and proceeded to tell him that I was poisoning him. (laughter) Of course, my brother Francis, there was no way in this world that he would have my Dad go live with him.

So, then he went crazy for us to put him in a nursing home. We went through hell because it was hard to get into a nursing home in those days. We finally got him into the nursing home and then he drove us crazy because he wanted out of the nursing home. When he was in the nursing home, I had to take him to the doctor, and then he finally put him in the hospital and he died in the hospital. He went into some kind of coma and we had a big fight with the doctor because they wanted to keep all these tubes and all that and we said “No.” I asked if he could cure him and they said, “No.” At the time they came out with something new that they wanted to try. They said they could keep him alive. I asked if he would be able to talk and eat, etc. “No,” they said. I said, “Why do you want to keep him alive, then, just to see how long you can keep him going?” So, Michael had a fight with the two doctors, and they didn’t put any tubes in him. I don’t know how long he was in the hospital, but he finally died.

I felt bad. I used to laugh at him a lot. He didn’t talk to me for five years. I lived with him for five years and he didn’t speak to me. After a while, I thought, “What the heck do I care?” He wouldn’t eat anything I fixed. I would feel bad when my parents died. You feel bad that you didn’t have a closer relationship with them.

I’d like my kids to keep the Italian traditions but I don’t think they will. Kathy, I
don’t think she will. There are a few things that Kathy’s husband has learned how to do, the Easter bread. They won’t have all the Italian cookies because they don’t get that excited about it. I mean they do like the guandas and I don’t know whether Kathy is going to carry it on or not. You’d have to ask her.

I’m not afraid of death because everyday I know I’m a little closer to it. The only thing is, I don’t care to have my body displayed to the public. I know Kathy, we have discussed it. “I’m not going to have your coffin open,” she said, “I hate it when people come and say how nice you look.” When you are dead, you are dead. But you know the next generation that is coming up. Kathy, her and Missy, we were going to pick her up at college. I don’t know how it came up, oh, we drove by Glendale Cemetery and I said, “Dad and I drive out to the cemetery a lot and not for anything, I don’t even get out of the car. Sam does. We just drive around.” And Kathy says, “That’s really exciting Mom that you go to the cemetery.” And I says, “Well, when your Dad and I die are you going to come?” She said, “Why? Why would I want to come to the cemetery? You aren’t there. There is a stone there and you are not there. Why do you want to go out there?” I said, “Well, I don’t know, really, but uh. Well, just have me cremated and put in a jar because why spend all that money because you don’t want to come out there anyway to see me. Spread my ashes somewhere. (laughter)”

I think to anyone there is a little fear of the unknown. I would not go to extreme means to stay alive with tubes and all that stuff. Absolutely not! I would prefer to die in my sleep. Why would anyone want to do that to anyone. I think it is cruel and inhuman treatment to keep them alive like that.

As I get older, I just want to be left in my home. We can get a nurse to move in here and my younger daughter Christine can drop in here everyday after work. I don’t want to go to a nursing home. We felt bad to do that to my dad. It was kind of an embarrassing thing. Now everybody does it. They stick them away somewhere.

I hate getting old. If I felt normal, it would be different. I don’t feel any different than I did twenty or thirty years ago, at least in my mind. In my body, my body knows
it. In my mind, you don’t feel yourself aging. When I look at my mother, she died when she was fifty. She was really young. I’m seventy today. So, that was very very young. I don’t know who wants to get old, do you?

John

I was in the service. When I finished my internship I went to Iowa City for my residency program. I was into it about three months when the Korean War got going. I was due to get drafted because I was a doctor. Very unconstitutional. But anyway, that’s what they did. So I volunteered because I knew we were going and you got to choose your branch of service if you volunteered. I went in the Air Force and they sent us all through basic training. I was drafted and went down through basic training. At the end of basic training, we all got our orders. I was young and single and there was no doubt I was scheduled to go to Korea. They had a lot of married doctors, older doctors. They more or less got the assignments here in the States. Young and single all got sent to Korea. So I had orders to go to Korea. And I didn’t mind that. I thought it would be sort of fun to see what war was like.

Everybody got ten day leave after basic training. Except the ones for Korea they needed so fast we didn’t get any ten day leave. So I went in to the office there and I requested ten days like everybody else was getting. My mother was dying and it was obvious that she wouldn’t live very long and I didn’t know, I’d be gone for at least a year or two. So I asked for ten days, told them I really should go home and see my mother before she dies. And they checked into all this and found out that really was the situation and they told me that I could have the ten days leave and that they would cancel my orders for Korea. They said that the rules were such that if you were in Korea and one in your immediate family dies, they had to send you home for the funeral or whatever it is. It just isn’t fair to send you over there and in six weeks or a couple of months they’re going to be bringing you back. So we’ll just reassign you. And I said, “No, I don’t mind.” I sorta did want to go. But they didn’t. They reassigned me to Omaha,
Nebraska. But I did get home and see my mother at that time. I’m not sure she was in a hospital. She was in a bed. She asked me something about whether I found anybody that I was interested in. I said, “Well, maybe I have. I think maybe I have.” I had met my wife. And at that time she told me, well, she asked if she was Italian. I said, “No.” She said, “Well, that didn’t make any difference. But it is important that you meet someone who is very strong. Raising a family is very difficult. You have to be very strong. So marry a strong girl.”

The earliest I remember hearing that my mother was ill, she was having trouble with her knee. But at this time I was gone, I wasn’t in Des Moines. I was in the Service, I was in my internship. In your internship, your time is totally consumed. But I think it dragged on for a year longer. But I didn’t even get home during that period of time at all. I can’t recall seeing my mother ill until I got this leave from the Air Force because I heard that she was doing very poorly. She wasn’t going to live very long so I felt I should go home and see her before I disappeared into Korea.

I do recall Frank discussing with me one time, and I was in medical school. I was either in medical school or my internship, discussing with me that he thought maybe he would send mother to Lourdes for the cure. That sort of shocked me. I thought by this time, I wasn’t going to church or anything and I was consumed by medicine and I thought this was really bizarre. Crazy. I was glad that never came to anything. I don’t know if anyone other than he was involved in that. He wanted to send her to Lourdes.

My mother was always very big in my life. But I think that being in medicine, I had seen enough of death that it didn’t particularly shock me. I realized that everybody had to die. It is very inevitable. I feel that I had a very fortunate life. I’m really ahead of the game. And if I were to die tomorrow, I don’t fear death at all. It’s something that comes to everyone. I’m way ahead of the game. When you get to this point, there aren’t a lot of fun things left that I like to do. It’s getting a little more difficult to pursue my outdoor activities and I’m not much of a one for sitting around. I try to entertain myself with my computer and that but I get quite bored sitting around. So I think I’d be ready
any time.

I’ve been very fortunate in my life. All the way along I’ve been very fortunate. I’ve been blessed with a family that has been very satisfying. The only thing I feel bad about is I would leave my wife. She is a very strong woman but I think she’d be a little adrift as far as taking care of finances and that sort of thing. She’d have plenty of money but have to handle all that. But I’m ready for it any time. I don’t fear it at all. And actually if life ever got really distressful for me, I think I would probably in some way end it myself. My wife and I both feel the same way about this. I would certainly never do anything very heroic. Even at the time I had this heart operation I thought twice about that. I mean, is it going to be worth it? I might get back to normal. If I had the feeling that it was going to extend my misery, I’d never let them do it.

I think anybody in medicine becomes very accepting. I think the experiences we have in medicine contribute greatly to it. I know I was very struck at the time Frank had his little problems because he was getting things my mother had. He thought he was in the early stages of myotrophic sclerosis, which my mother died of. And it does tend to run in families, some familial tendencies. And he was totally in a panic. For good reason. Of course, he was very young and had a young family. I always wonder that he is so unaccepting of it all.

I think the more death you experience the more understanding you get. Realize it is inevitable. I enjoyed the benefits of old age but I certainly don’t like the physical deterioration that is kind of hard to take and you still would like to go raft the river, you know, and row the river and go camping and fishing and all that. And you realize it is harder work than it used to be. Still hope you can do it but the other benefits of old age I have enjoyed very greatly. The financial freedom and the freedom of the time. There was a great change in my life when I quit medicine. I was really burned out of the responsibilities. And I finally realized what it was...what a relief it was to just not worry the phone was going to ring and somebody was going to have problems. A surgeon’s life is really up and down. I really found it enjoyable. What a relief, I felt.
I don’t have any unreal view that I have a perfect family. A few of my kids, they all have some problems. But on the whole, they turned out pretty well. I think we can take credit for that and I also realize that a lot of that is just luck. We are very fortunate that they turned out that way because I can realize looking back at my life, my younger years, the wrong thing happening at the wrong time can easily ‘cause a lot of problems and change your whole life.

I feel very fortunate in living the life I have. I never really had any money problems. I always worked hard. I’ve always taken great satisfaction that in practicing my profession I never took advantage of it at all. I really enjoyed taking care of people. And this is in great contrast with the way I was when I was a kid. How selfish I was when I was a kid. Unbelievable the change that medicine made in my life. Thinking of other people.

Joey

My mom probably had the biggest funeral, was loved by more people, than you can possibly have imagined. There were, in today’s rates, probably $100,000 worth of flowers at her funeral. The only Italian funeral I can remember was my mom’s. There was enough wailing and crying at that one. In fact, after that one, I couldn’t go to a funeral for years. Several years before I’d even go to another funeral. Went to hers and went to my dad’s. And, ‘cause it was a moving experience to me. ‘Cause Aunt Laura just went bananas. She wanted to crawl in the casket. They had to physically restrain her. The wake was at the Dunn’s Funeral Home in Lincoln, or in Des Moines, I mean. I was living over here then when she died. But I went back there, and all my friends come over at the end of the wake. It was huge. I don’t know whether Dunn’s had ever had one that big before or had one that big since. ‘Cause it was just amazing the number of people that my mother touched.

I was home almost every weekend before I got married. Then whenever possible after, but I left home in ‘49. And she died in ‘53. So really she, I didn’t know she was
really bad until she was practically to the crutches at that stage. I knew that she had a little trouble walking. She said she’d fall down once in a while. ‘Cause I’d just come home on weekends. They didn’t have the store any more then. So, I was just at home with ‘em, but it’s a tough disease. See Francis was diagnosed with it at one time. It’s amazing.

Ma was able to come to my wedding. Yeah, she and Pop came. I got married here in Lincoln. Mary Terese was in the bridal party. Francis was in the bridal party. John was in the bridal party. It was a beautiful wedding. She had five bridesmaids or four bridesmaids and a maid of honor. The best man was a guy who I went to school with. And her two cousins and my two brothers, five of em. And a kid from the hospital from Iowa Methodist who worked in the office there who I got acquainted with when I worked there. He was the singer, Frank Capone. Beautiful voice. In fact, the priest that was going to marry us wanted to know if he should get a hold of an Italian guy here in town named Louie that did all the singing at all the funerals. ‘Cause he was good. “No,” I says, “I got a friend of mine from Des Moines that’s gonna sing.” He was very apprehensive about it. And Frank came over the day before, and they went up with organist and rehearsed. He had a beautiful voice, you know. A great wedding.

When my mother found out she was ill, I think, she took it quite well, really. The last thing I heard her say was, “Go eat.” She was still, she was in bed, but she said, “Go eat.” Once after we were married, we went over to Des Moines on a Sunday and I took Marie’s dad’s cousin. You know, good friends of the family here. And we took ‘em over with us. And Mom was still able to navigate then. And she put on a feast that was just amazing. ‘Cause she loved to cook. Wanted everybody to come and eat. She was still walking then. Still walking. I remember her cooking in the wheelchair when I’d go home on the weekends, yeah. I came home every weekend to see her. I felt that was really an important thing to do. I didn’t get home every weekend, but I’m sure I got home every other weekend. It’s just, jump in the car and go, when I got off work.

I just happened to be there when she died. They didn’t have to call me. I was
there. Oh, we were all in the front room, and the doctor was over, and she was bad enough that she couldn’t eat anymore. Couldn’t hardly drink. And he come out and asked us if we wanted to put a tube down her. We all said, “No.”

After Mom’s death, I probably came back to Des Moines once a month, every other month to see Pops. Whenever I could. The last real conversation I had with my dad, probably made Michael and Mary Terese partially as well as they are today. ‘Cause he, we were out in the backyard, and he says...I don’t know how it come up...but he says, “I’m getting old. What am I going to do with this property?” I says, “Pop, what are you worried about?” He says, “I want to be able to leave you something.” And I says, “Hey., if we can’t make it on our own, what you’re gonna leave us ain’t gonna help. It’s too late. You know what I’d do if it were me. Sell Mary Terese the house you’re living in.” ‘Cause she was living there with Sam. “For $10,000. And she’s got to provide you a place to live. And sell the apartment next door to Michael for $15,000. And you can put the money in the bank.” Well, Michael turned that $15,000 house into how much? $300,000 or more? Who knows? I’m sure he’s never told anybody, ‘cept maybe Lucille. And she might not even know. (laughter) So if I’d told him to hang on to it, I’d have been a hell of a lot better off. (laughter)

Cristine got everything. Whatever was left. You know, Cristine was little. She was just a kid. He left it all to take care of Cristine. We were all married. And she wasn’t. And still isn’t. (laughter) Yeah, I’m sure she’ll never be. I’m pretty sure she won’t be. But she’s happy, I think. Seems to enjoy what she’s doing.

While I’d certainly hate to die the way my mother died, I’m ready to go anytime. (chuckle) I don’t know whether I could commit suicide or not. But I told Marie, “There’s no way I want you or anybody to extend any extraordinary means of keeping me alive. If I have a heart attack, I don’t want any resuscitation. Let me go. Let me go, baby, let me go.” I’d hate to go to the hospital, having worked in hospitals around sick people a lot doing x-ray work. When you lose quality of life, which to me is being able to get out and do what you want to do, you might as well be dead.
Joan

She was the focal point of the family. Family kind of fell apart when she died. I think I had to take on more responsibility because Mary Terese was married and gone and I was the only one to help with Cristine. I probably wouldn't have learned how to drive if she had not gotten sick. She couldn't drive anymore. I used to have to drive her everywhere. I learned how to do the laundry then. We became closer mostly because we were together more. She liked to go places and do things. So I had to take her wherever she wanted to go. We were just together more. Did we talk? I can't remember conversations, but I have to assume we did.

I don't know if I would have learned to drive that young if it hadn't been for that. Girls weren't taught to drive when I was growing up. The boys were taught, but never the girls. They had to learn however way they could. Which is rare because my mother drove. Oh, she hated to give up driving. That was the same as it would kill me. It's your source of independence49.

I recall my relationship with my mother as being very good. I did things for her that if you asked a child today to do for their parent, they would just almost tell you to go to hell. But that never would have occurred to me. I had to take care of her almost like a nurse at certain times. I gave her enemas. I bathed her in bed. It reached a point, I had to give her her shots. And there was no question of whether I would do these things. There was no one else to do them. Not that other people didn't help. I'm not saying that I had the full responsibility of her. I would even have to make arrangements if I wanted to go out with my friends for somebody to be there just in case something would happen. I had to make arrangements with Michael or Lucille or Mary Terese or somebody to come over to be there. Because you would not want to leave her alone because of Cristine.

49Lena Porti left Joanne her stationwagon in her will. Joanne thinks this was because she used to drive her around all the time and it was her mother's way of thanking her. I interpret this more based on Lena's philosophy concerning the ownership of a car. For Lena, it was a gift of independence to her twenty year old daughter.
Cristine was only seven or eight years old when my mother died. My mother couldn’t have taken care of her.

At first, she used to fall a lot. It was her knees that gave out. She always had bruises on her knees because she would fall. Especially if she tried to go up the front steps. There was like five or six steps. And two or three steps to get into the house itself. There was steps going into the store. I think it was a long time before she went to a doctor. My mother basically didn’t believe in them. She just thought she was clumsy. Took to walking up the back driveway and into the house that way. Because she couldn’t maneuver the steps. It was hard for her to go to church. So we started going to, we started going to a church on 2nd Avenue, St. Mary’s. That was basically ground level. Maybe had one step. So, started after a while taking her there to church because no matter where you went, like at the Cathedral, there where steps. St. John’s had lots of steps. And she just couldn’t manage them.

When she was first diagnosed, they thought she had multiple sclerosis. They changed their minds and diagnosed her as anatrophic lateral sclerosis. I was never told exactly what was going to happen. I’m sure they did that because I was in high school and just after I got out. I’m sure that I wasn’t told simply because I was too young.

It started affecting her speech patterns and it was like she had a thick tongue. And couldn’t quite get things out. She was going to a Dr. Luciano. I don’t know if someone recommended him or what. But she did tell him that he could use her as a guinea pig. Try medicines, you know. Because, outside of Lou Gehrig, and I don’t know if anyone ever said Lou Gehrig’s disease to her. I don’t know if anybody ever heard of this disease before. Multiple sclerosis was known, but I don’t think this one was.

I took helping my mother as a matter of course. I don’t know that I resented it, but I was probably angry about it. I wanted to do something. I did want to go to college. But that was almost out because we couldn’t afford it. I even checked into joining the air force or anything. I wanted to get away from home. And my brother Michael just basically said to me that I had an obligation. Everyone else was married. I had an
obligation to stay home and take care of my mother. So once that realization hit, there was no question that that’s what I would do.

It got to the point where she had to walk with a cane, she had to walk with help. She would have to hold on to you to walk because her legs would just give way. It would not hold her up. Her voice got worse so that she was reduced to writing you messages because you could not understand her which was very frustrating to her. She would just get so angry that she could not get through to you what she wanted. There were certain things that after times, like with a little kid, you understand what they’re trying to say, but sometimes, she would have to write it. So we got her one of those tablets with the stick that you pull up and it erases. So that she wouldn’t have to go through reams of paper. She would write words, certain words. There would be no simple sentences or anything like that. It always amazed the doctors, amazed all us, that she never lost the use of her hands, which she should have done. Because it affects your spinal column and having lost the use of her legs, she should have lost the use of her hands. She never did. She still cooked. Not all the time, but she did.

She would be in the kitchen in the wheelchair and she would tell me what to do. That’s one of the ways I learned how to cook. She wanted me to know, but it was also a necessity, that I cook. She would bring the wheelchair up and open the oven door and cook. She never did lose the use of her hands. I swear it was out of shear will power. Because I think she thought that would have been the last straw if she had lost that.

She really didn’t like people to come over and see her. She did and she didn’t. She didn’t want anybody who was coming simply because they were curious. In fact, one friend came who was kind of a pretentious person, asked nothing but, “How does it feel? What’s it like not to be able to...” Just really obtuse, coarse questions. And when she left, mother told us that she never wanted that woman to ever come in her house again. And we kept her away. She did not like it, but we kept her away. But there were certain people who she felt comfortable, who had always been there.

There was a point in time where they took out her tonsils, ‘cause she had a hard
time eating and swallowing. They took out her tonsils thinking that would help. She had to go to Omaha to have this done. I think Michael brought her, and I think Aunt Emma went. I remember Michael coming home and telling me that they could not risk putting her under and so they clipped out these tonsils piece by piece while she was awake. I made a vow then and there that no one was ever going to touch my tonsils. Just the thought of that. I don’t think my mother ever really got over it either. I think they tried to freeze it, and it didn’t work. She could feel them snip, and they did it just piece by piece. But it didn’t help. It didn’t help.

She just gradually deteriorated. Got worse and worse. It got to the point where she couldn’t eat. A lot of it had to be very soft. Things like pudding, jello that would slide down easily. Ice cream. I suppose today they could have fed her through a tube into her stomach. I don’t know if she would have allowed that. She was also adamant about going to the hospital. She made us promise that she would never die in a hospital.

My father was of no use. In fact, I remember he cursed her once. He took this personally, like she was doing this to be mean to him. She really felt so guilty about that and she raged at God. It was horror. Well, I was there most of the time. She was just angry at God. ‘Cause my father made her feel guilty about doing this to him, you know. So he was of no help.

I had to learn what to do. We had nurses upstairs that lived in the apartments. And they helped. When she first started out having to take Demerol for pain, the nurse upstairs would do it. It came to a point where she had to have it more often, and then through the night, and I had to learn how to give shots. They started out being given in the hip. But it got to the point where there just wasn’t a place left. It became so hard that you couldn’t get the needle in, and I started giving it to her in the front of her thigh. It was just something I had to do. I was terrified, but I did it. The nurses taught me. I think I did it to an orange once or twice. That’s how they used to teach nurses how to give shots. I just had to do it.

I think she went through all the stages, I mean, she knew she was going to die. I
think she went through all stages that a person goes through. The disbelief, the anger, the self-pity, um. And then finally, I think she became resigned to the fact. I think that one of the greatest joys she had was when we knew she was, I mean, who knew when, but we knew she could have gone anytime. Monsignor Lyons was pastor at the Cathedral, and they were great friends. Had been for years. He’d been at the Cathedral for years and years when I was a kid in grade school. Anyway, he arranged to have Bishop Daly come and give her Extreme Unction and say Mass in her room which was then very unheard of for them to say Mass outside of a church. That was the biggest joy to her. The bishop came because Monsignor Lyons asked him. I don’t know if Michael was there. I was there. Bishop Daly was that kind of person.

Mom started to tell us what she wanted to wear, where she wanted to be buried. From what funeral home. She didn’t want two or three days. She just wanted one. These were all her decisions. Written on the pad. I think probably Michael was told. I was. I knew about most of them. She wanted to be buried in a dress that she had worn for everybody’s wedding. Because it was the only one left. She had us give away the rest of her clothes. She wore the same dress for Michael, Francis, Mary Terese, everybody. Then, she’d have it on when I and Cristine got married. I mean that was her thought process.

When she told us what funeral home which was the one on Grand Avenue which just horrified everybody. I think I told you this before, most Italians went to Caldwell’s. We were horrified. She had gone to somebody’s funeral, an American friend, and she thought it was such a beautiful funeral that she vowed then that was where she was going to go. That’s just what she wanted to do.

It just got to be worse and worse. One of the last things she ever ate was some fresh asparagus. She thought she could eat some creamed asparagus. And she tried, but I don’t think she got more than a taste. To this day, I cannot eat fresh asparagus. A thing with me.

I used to have to get up every four hours and give her the Demerol. She was just
in such pain. I did not sleep in the same room with her. I was just across the hall. I remember one night, Genevieve came to spend the night with her. Sometimes other people would be there. Somebody had to be awake with her those last two or three weeks. Genevieve came over and it was her greatest fear that my mother would die while she was there, and she did. We knew it was the end because you could just hear it in her breath. I didn’t know or hear of it then, but I did later. But the death rattle. There is such a thing. She was taking these big gasping breaths. And then all of a sudden there wasn’t any sound any more.

It was a terrifying sound. But at the same time, I was hoping and praying that she would die. To put her out of her misery. I can remember when Grandpa’s mother Carmilla was dying. And they used to rant and rave and swear to God and “Please don’t let her die” and all. And here’s this woman, she was close to a hundred years old, and I said something once to Grandma, your grandma, that I didn’t understand why everyone was praying for her to stay alive. I said, “Why aren’t you praying that she die? Do you want to see her live like that?” And she said to me that I didn’t understand what it was like to lose a mother. And I just looked at her walked away. But I told her later that I didn’t understand why anybody would want anyone close to them to live like that. It just, that didn’t make sense to me. So there was a great sense of relief. I was almost joyous that she was in peace. I think we all were. I don’t think it struck us until later. I get sadder now when I think that she didn’t live. I mean, she was only fifty.

Well, I think it was young to me then. I was only twenty years old. Cristine was only eight. She was a young woman in thought, in her outlook. Anyway, we did what she wanted. We got into big fights with Aunt Laura and Aunt Emma and everybody and they were all horrified that we didn’t spend the night at the funeral home. The one thing that we didn’t do, and I think it was mostly because of we didn’t have the guts to do it, was that there was certain people that she didn’t even want to come to her funeral. Because she said, “If they couldn’t bother to come and see me when I was alive, why did they want to see me when I was dead.” Not a lot of people, but just the people that she
always thought were her friends. So we had the one-day wake. I did break down when I first came in and the first time you see 'em laid out. I did. But otherwise, I think everybody was upset with us that we weren’t hysterical. They didn’t live through what we had lived through. And they didn’t understand.

I got a lot closer to Michael. Mostly because we were the only ones there. I think some of her children avoided her because they couldn’t deal with it. I didn’t understand that at the time, but I understand it today. Not everybody can deal with that kind of thing. But I think that hurt her. Francis didn’t come around much. Well, John was stationed in Omaha, but he could have been there if he had wanted to, but he didn’t either. He was stationed in Omaha because the Air Force did that. I think he would have preferred to have gone to Korea, cause after Omaha, he went to England. They made him stay home. He could have come more often.

I don’t think Joey came very often, either. That would have been consistent with their relationship. I don’t know think she cared whether he came. If you want my honest opinion. I don’t know if I would tell Joey that, but I don’t think she would have cared if he came or not. I think she would have felt like she did with some of her friends, “Why are you coming now?” He didn’t come all these years.

No, there were no last minute little bits of wisdom. She wasn’t that kind of woman. Pearls of wisdom came from Aunt Emma’s lips, never from my mother’s. She wasn’t the philosophizing kind of person. She was a more down-to-earth, practical. I always got from my mother that you can do just about anything that you want to, if you want to. Although she was probably very sexist in her way. But at the same time it was, I mean, she never said that we couldn’t do certain things because we were girls. But at the same time, I’m sure she felt that a woman’s place was in the home, but she certainly wasn’t there. So I don’t think it would have surprised her, you know, if we weren’t. She was a businesswoman. She always was. I think that’s one of the reasons why when your father wanted me to work, I demanded a housekeeper. My mother always had a housekeeper. And if I was going to work, I didn’t mind working, but I wanted somebody
to help around the house. Mom did the cooking, but she always had someone to clean and sometimes do the laundry until Mary Terese and I were old enough to, and then we did the laundry. And she had someone come, an Italian woman came. Once a week, twice a week.

She still had friends come over even when she was in the wheelchair, as long as she was able. If she could, she would play cards. She had that group of friends that would come over. They would come out of their way and they would come to our house 'cause most of them lived places where there was lots of stairs. So they would come here to our house. And she always made sure that there was good food, desserts. You know, made coffee, all that. I think she would have like to have gone other places, but nearly every place, most of her friends had lots of stairs. Ange Rua lived over their grocery store, big flight of stairs. Rose Tianno lived over their grocery store, big flight of stairs. So there was no way she could go visit. Even Aunt Emma, there were stairs going into Aunt Emma’s house; stairs going into Laura’s house.

She appreciated my help. It was just something I felt. I don’t know that she would have said it, but that didn’t bother me. I don’t think. It doesn’t bother me now. Maybe it did then. If she wanted something, she would turn to me. Mostly because, I would do things for her that she couldn’t ask other people. Well, we were not embarrassed by one another, I think.

Death is something that’s just a natural function. It’s never frightened me. *I thought I would die by age fifty.* Yes, I did. I don’t know why. I lived past fifty. I was amazed. I really truly was amazed. And I always thought, you know, that this supposedly was hereditary, that I might be the one to get it. I don’t know why I thought that, either. Now, I think that I am on gravy. And the only thing I fear about death is I would hate to go like driving in the car and take somebody else with me.

I’ve already made arrangements. I have a living will, and I’ve certainly told everybody. My mother was like that, too. We could have put her in a hospital and kept her alive for months in an iron lung, and we were criticized for that, too, by her brothers
and sisters. But, she didn’t want it and what was the point, sooner or later she was gonna
die. And she was in a lot of pain and being in an iron lung wouldn’t have helped
anything. So what would we have kept her alive for?

I met Bill the day mother died. ‘Cause she died like three or four in the morning.
And Genevieve, we went shopping to buy something to wear to the funeral. Something
black. You had to wear black in those days. And I didn’t have anything black. We had
to go buy something. And Genevieve said she had this cousin she wanted me to meet.
So we went shopping. Went to Babe’s, and Bill met us there. I think, probably had a
good time. It was like I was out of prison, too. I didn’t have to go home. There was
nothing to rush back for. Didn’t have to worry about anything. I was free.

People were making arrangements for the funeral. I wasn’t a part of that. I didn’t
get to go help. I don’t think I would have if they had asked. And everybody knew what
she wanted to wear and that kind of thing. There we got into another hassle with
somebody because we didn’t buy the fancy negligee for my mother. Give me a break,
you know. No way. “Why didn’t you at least buy her a new dress? She wanted to be
buried in this.” You know. No matter what we did, we got a hassle from somebody.
But we’re the type of family, we didn’t care. We’re gonna’ do what she wanted.
Tradition and custom be damned, it was just too bad if they didn’t like it.

A lawyer drew up the her will. So it was probably formal language. But, she
mentioned all her children by name. She mentioned Michael, Francis, Mary Terese,
Johnny, Joey and said that she was leaving them nothing because she had amply provided
for them during her lifetime\textsuperscript{50} and that she was leaving the furniture and house to me and
Cristine for whatever reasons, I don’t know. ‘Cause I thought it was a lot of junk. I’m
sure today, part of it, some of it was antique. She didn’t have anything, she had no life
insurance, she had no money. The house was left to Dad. I do remember that Michael

\textsuperscript{50}This was Joanne’s interpretation perhaps based on something her mother said to her.
The will itself gives no reason for not giving anything to her other children. Other than that,
Joanne was fairly accurate in her description of her mother’s will.
was the executor of the will for which he will receive no remuneration. I can remember Michael saying how he wouldn’t take anything for handling this. We always thought it was so good of him, and then I got down there, read the will and found that mother stipulated that he wasn’t to receive anything. (laughter) Tried to make himself out to be better than he was. I don’t think he really would have taken anything anyway, but she made sure that that stipulated, because, by law...I think it’s like two percent of the estate. I don’t know if there was any bequests of personal things to anybody. I don’t know. She gave a lot away while she was alive. She had a lot of antiques. And she gave a lot of them away.

There are things I wish I had. But they didn’t mean as much to me then, I think. I signed everything over so that Cristine got everything, all the furnishings. ‘Cause what was I going to do with them? Now, there were times later when I was trying to furnish a house, probably wish I would have kept some. Bill, at times, would harp about that. And I said, “No one forced me to do that. And it was mine, and you had nothing to say about it.” I didn’t even ask him. And he got very upset with that, but it was mine and it was given to me and it had nothing to do with him. By the same token, when his parents left him all that, I never asked what he did with it because it was not mine. I didn’t figure I had any say-so in it.

My father and Mary Terese just did not get along. I’m not quite sure why. I think my father was angry that my mother died. My mother was angry that she was dying, leaving my father. And he was angry at her for dying and leaving him. And maybe he expected Mary Terese to become a wife to him. I don’t mean in a physical sense. I mean, in terms of taking care of him. Because he was used to being taken care of. And Mary Terese was married and had a child.

I got married right after Mother died, and was living with Bill’s family. Because Mary Terese bought the house, I think. Possibly. I’m not quite sure why. They were living across the street in an apartment that we had owned. I don’t know whether she bought the house and moved in or whether she lived there for a while and then bought the
I think he took Cristine away from her as a punishment. Because he didn’t think that she would raise Cristine properly. Maybe he thought Cristine would be too spoiled.

She didn’t want to go. Michael and Lucille had several children. She was just gonna be one more. Michael was determined that she wasn’t going to be spoiled. And they were living in very tight quarters. Even though that top floor had been remodeled and everything especially for them. A huge kitchen and a huge living room. There was only two bedrooms.

I think Cristine felt that she didn’t have a home. She didn’t understand. She loved Mary Terese. She did not understand what was going on. And my father was just so adamant. You couldn’t talk to him. And to be frank with you, I don’t know that I wanted to be involved. I had just been married. I don’t think it was good for Cristine. It was like her mother died and her father left her. Or gave her away. I’m sure Michael felt, in his way, that he’d be a better parent. He thought he was the parent of the world. His kids didn’t watch TV. They didn’t do much of anything.

The world is a very scary place today. We were so innocent and so safe. And so free. And people cared about one another. That time I got sunstroke and I was coming home from the movie and I got sick and I was at the bottom of Pleasant Street hill, there was a Methodist church there and I was sitting there. And somebody came by and stopped and offered to take me home. It was someone in the neighborhood. I mean people did things like that. I don’t think they do today. They don’t look out for one another. And care for people, one another. Everybody’s too selfish, self-centered, too. And you’re too frightened if you would stop and offer help that you’d get sued or get accused. It’s just a different world.

Cristine

I have a vivid memory of the day my mother died and the events surrounding that. I remember her sickness. I remember her having to use one of those magic slates to communicate. I remember going up to visit her in the hospital up in Rochester when they
diagnosed the disease. I got car sick regularly and so it wasn't a pleasant trip. I went with maybe Michael and Mary Terese. I remember the robe that she wore. They bought her a purple black looking flower one. I remember your Mom sitting on the front of the doorstep saying the Rosary. I remember Dr. Fujiama coming to the house. I remember having the communion kit by the bed. I would say my mother was religious. Yes. She was...yes. I would say so. I think probably the person who is most like her is my sister Mary. I mean in some ways. Much like her.

I remember that I couldn't be there when she died. Which I was really angry and upset. Very Angry. All my brothers and sisters knew she was dying. It was obvious that she was going to die that day. I don't know if she was on an I.V. I was taken to the old lady's house across the street. And I remember your mother coming over there to tell me that she died. I wanted to go see her, but they wouldn't let me. I could still cry. I just get upset when I think about it. I saw her body at the funeral home. But it wasn't the same. But I thought it was pretty dumb on their part. I think at that age, I don't know that they could deal with me and I don't think they knew how to deal with...I don't think they did a very good job with it. No. I don't think any people have a perfect way to deal with situations such as that.

I remember vaguely being at the funeral home. I remember my Aunt Laura yelling and then fainting or something. I remember that she was buried in the suit that she wore to Francis' wedding. The suit she wore to everybody's wedding. It was navy blue with kind of lace on it. I think she wanted to be buried in that suit. It was her best suit. She only had one suit. She was wearing that suit at Francis' wedding, Michael's wedding, Mary Terese's wedding and maybe at Joe's. That was her dress.

The story that she wanted to be buried in that dress so that she would have it on when Joanne got married and I got married and John wasn't married when she died...that is the kind of sentiment that I don't think my Mom would have had. Or if she had it, she wouldn't voice it. I wouldn't know. I goofed. I didn't get married. She may have talked more to them. They were adults and I was just a child.
I only have the memory of being in the funeral home with the open casket and she had violets in her hands. Other than that I have no memory of anything. The Mass. Maybe... I think I'm getting it confused with my father's.

I don't remember much about that. The only thing I remember. I have a memory of the funeral home which I think Brien, I don't know the name. I think it was on University Avenue, I'm not sure. I remember the room which he was laid out. I remember the casket being open. I remember my brother John being home and being in a limousine. I think I was with Michael and Lucille.

After my mother died, I didn't live with my Dad. Not at all by myself, I think. I have no memory of that. I don't know where I was. I just know that Mary and Sam moved in at some point to take care of him and me and they had Kathy. Kathy was about two because I think I was about five years older. She must have just turned forty. When I mean just turned forty, I'm talking about the last three or four years. Remember, I'm getting old. All time has collapsed. Uhm, so they moved in. I remember thinking that my sister persecuted me. She made me wash the dishes. I used to accuse her of dirtying extra dishes so that I would have more to wash.

No it was not a harmonious situation. For me. I was pretty, I think I was a spoiled brat. I don't think I had to do anything. I was pretty much independent and got to do whatever I wanted to do. So, I remember one day, Mary said, "Would you please count everything in the kitchen that I am using. I'm tired of you saying I dirty more dishes." So, I remember counting all the dishes and realized that she didn't really dirty extra ones. I did not get along with Mary. No, not when I was that age. Eight, nine through ten. So at one point, I don't think my father thought I was being treated fairly either. I don't think any of that was true. I think I was a normal child at that age who didn't want to do anything. I think that I had been spoiled. I remember having a big meeting when I went over to live with Michael and Lucille's. I was no nicer to Lucille than I was to Mary Terese. So, it was easy because the kids were there and I would play with them and every night I would go home to my father's. I got to move whenever I
wanted. It was pretty much what I wanted to do. No, I don’t think it was the wisest thing for them to let me do what I wanted to do. But I got to do what I wanted to do at that point.

Dad stayed there with Sam and Mary. I don’t know. They didn’t really get along. It would be an awkward situation. She was coming in to live in her parent’s house and she had to be the head of the house and he was used to having it a different way than she wanted to do it. I would imagine.

I think it was okay living with Michael. I think on one level I had a good relationship with Lucille. She was sympathetic to things that I liked to do and so it was nice. It was just a different. It was just different. Course, I was older, too. I stayed with Michael until I was a sophomore in high school. Then I went back to Mary. When my father died and my sister Mary moved down to the Southside, I lived with her for two years. Yeah, I went down there for two years. My freshman and sophomore years in high school. And then when Michael and Lucille bought this place out here, I moved back here. I have no idea why I moved to Mary’s. Maybe ‘cause she had a new house and I wanted to live in a new house. The biggest difference between living at Michael’s or Mary Terese’s was I had to do more dishes.

Uhm, I do remember that the year my mother was sick and she died in May, I got a “D” in religion. I was a good student in everything else. Why? I don’t know. I don’t remember the course. I remember a couple of the nuns visiting the house and, maybe it isn’t true but I think it is. I remember my report card and I had a “D” and I never got below an “A” in anything. I just think I was probably mad at God, that’s all. That’s a fairly typical reaction for a child.

*There is a theory that the way a society and culture view death is a key indicator of how they will live their lives. Expressions of sorrow concerning the death of an individual has gone through a cyclical change since the Middle Ages in Europe. Myths and tales told of that time show that a high degree of demonstration and postulation was*
accorded at the grave site of the deceased. This gave way to a calmer acceptance of
death. A few hundred years later, the period of mourning in Western civilization held two
purposes: it constrained the family to demonstrate a mourning it perhaps did not feel, and
it protected the family from the excesses of their grief through constant visits from
relatives and friends. However during the nineteenth century, mourners returned to
excessive spontaneous expressions of grief: crying, screaming, languishing and fasting.
Aries (1974) suggests that this exaggerated expression of death symbolizes that survivors
accepted the death of another person with greater difficulty during this period.

At the time of Lena Porti’s death in 1953, many of these nineteenth century
“exaggerated expressions” of mourning were still deeply rooted in the Italian American
culture in Des Moines. Although the period of mourning after the funeral had begun to
diminish by the 1950s, the expectations of the wake and graveside behavior was still
firmly in place. The Italians expected a three day wake in which the survivors,
surrounded by family and friends, stay up the whole time chanting and moaning their
sorrow. The verbalization of the grief was the responsibility of the female friends and
relatives. Although no one said this directly, the three days were symbolic of the three
days that Christ laid in the tomb before his resurrection. Without exception, those
interviewed described graveyard scenes in which survivors hurled themselves on the
caskets before or while they were being lowered into the ground. What followed the
burial was years of visitation to the gravesite.

As with everything else in her life, Lena Porti had to be unique in her death. In
the year before she died, she laid out specifically how she wanted her funeral to be. She
gave away all of her personal belongings. She broke convention and insisted on a one
night wake and to be taken to the non-Italian funeral home. Her children were subjected
to a good deal of criticism concerning their mother’s choices. This sort of pragmatic
approach to death reflects her very practical approach to life, an attitude that seems to be
shared by the majority of her offspring. She refused any extraordinary medical means of
keeping her alive and each one of her children have expressed the same desire. In fact,
Joan has written a living will and John told me that he would not hesitate to take his own
life if he felt it was no longer of quality.

Regardless of the degree that they broke the cultural rules in place, they firmly
upheld one important one: there was no question that they would nurse their mother at
home so that she could be surrounded by family and friends at the time of her death. The
impact of their mother’s tragic death and the events that surrounded it have had a major
influence on her children’s lives. I was brought up with an extremely practical attitude
about death as a natural, unavoidable part of life. My mother and Aunt Mary speak of
their death and have for years, laying out details of how they want their funeral to be.
This may seem strange but it has eliminated some of the fear of the inevitable event for
me. At my father’s father’s funeral during the mid-1970s, I remember thinking it odd
how overly expressive my cousins were being, wailing and crying. At my own father’s
funeral five years ago, I saw my siblings expressed their grief differently. A few of us
expressed our mourning internally (to the criticism of those around us, thinking us
uncaring) and a few others were crying and lamenting. Particularly my younger sister was
putting on a big show. At the time, I thought that she was carrying on a bit too much but
now I see it as a natural part of her heritage, particularly from our father’s side of the
family. It was very “un-Italian” of me to judge her emotionality as wrong.\footnote{My oldest sister kindly agreed to proofread an early draft of this work. When she got to
this section concerning our grandfather and father’s funerals, she scribbled it out and wrote
boldly that this passage was untrue. This brought home a couple of important issues to me:
1) when dealing with memory, there are no “truths” but differing perspectives (as this work
clearly illustrates), and 2) that she was but the first of several family members who were
going to read this work and offer criticism. To check my perception, I telephoned my
younger sister and asked her if she could remember grandfather’s funeral and what she
remembered. I then asked her if she remembered her own behavior at Dad’s funeral. Her
answer to both agreed with what I have presented here. It is my hope that my oldest sister,
and everyone else who reads this work, will be open to the multiple voices presented here and
what they say about the individuals and their world, rather than trying to find a definitive
reality.}
Another interesting fact that emerges in this final chapter is how inadequately adults handle death with children. The contrast between Christine's pain at not being able to be with her mother at the time of her death, and Mary Terese's concerns that she not see their mother in death is very poignant and sad. Too often in our society, we try to protect young people from the realities of living, particularly death and dying. In some ways, it seems it is our own pain, grief and fears that we do not want to face.
CONCLUSIONS

When I started this study, I was searching for explanations to some specific questions concerning my ethnicity and the history of my family in the United States: 1) what does it mean to be a Calabrian Iowan during the first half of the twentieth century; 2) did the Porti family go through a process of Americanization, or did it experience a natural change that any family living in Italy or America would experience as they climb from a working class peasant culture to a more middle class urban one, and 3) what does that mean to me, the granddaughter of immigrants. As a student of anthropology, I was wondering whether the life history/autobiographical approach was the best method of discovering keys to understanding ethnicity. This concluding chapter contains the answers I have ascertained from conducting the Porti family study.

The Family Autobiographical Approach

Watson and Watson-Franke (1985:204) suggests that apart from adapting theory and social constructs to understand specific life histories, anthropologists and other social scientists should “reverse the process and start with the life history as a basis for constructing theories” of societal processes and the individual’s role in culture change. I think the area of ethnic studies is a good place to start. As evidenced in my introductory chapter, there are as many theories about ethnicity and research to support them as there are different ethnics in America. The life history method allowed me to set aside all of the significant factors that the literature designated as specifically Italian American, and explore the dynamics of being Italian American through the memories of the Porti family.

I discovered through an analysis of the questionnaires that quantitative research is
extremely limited in its ability to explore the dynamics of ethnicity. Longer term, more in-depth interviews and participant observation allowed me to penetrate deeper how family interactions are shaped by a blend of their parent’s culture of birth and the culture of Des Moines, Iowa. The life history approach reveals how age, gender and birth order influences the perceptions of each individual sibling and the extent to which personality and ethnicity are tightly interwoven. Getting an affirmative answer to whether a respondent was raised around an extended family on a questionnaire, did not help me understand the extent to which grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins intervened in the daily life of an individual. The quantitative data seems shallow in comparison to the richness of the qualitative material.

Some of the major critiques concerning the compilation of life histories (Watson, Watson-Franke 1985, Langness, Frank 1981) are focused on the process in which the information is solicited and then presented to the reader. Oscar Lewis received the brunt of these criticisms, when he published The Children of Sanchez in 1961. For many, Lewis was not explicit enough in his methodology, the major complaint being that he did not explain how he edited and pieced together each autobiography from the multitude of taped interviews. Based on my own experience, I now realized that Lewis could have spent the entire book on the explanation of the process and very little space would have been left for the data itself. The interviews, in their raw form, are difficult to follow due to the randomness of the remembrances. Some editing and organization is necessary and unavoidable.

Another criticism is that if the stories are not told in the order in which they are volunteered, we lose those factors which the informant deemed as important. As a social scientists, we are trained to be objective and unbiased. While this is not totally possible, we do the best we can. When dealing with memory, particularly the elderly, it is not so much what story they decide to tell first, but all the stories in relationship to each other.

52See Appendix One.
As my Uncle Michael suggested, "The most important stories are those I have probably forgotten."

These criticisms are all part of the deconstruction analysis of anthropology in which our objectives and biases are always being questioned. My problem with this whole school of thought is that if you do not trust me to be ethical in my presentation of my research unless I go into ad nauseam details as to my biases (many of which exist in my subconscious), than you can not trust that I am forthright in my presentations of my biases. On the other hand, knowing that my aunts and uncles, not only would be read this work but would be within close rebuttal range, kept me more honest than anything else.

The following are some of the conclusions that I can now draw concerning the Italian Americans in Des Moines based on the Porti family autobiographies.

**What does it mean to be a Calabrian Iowan?**

When my grandfather changed his last name, it was symbolic of the transformation of his offspring when compared to those family members left behind in Belsito. He might not have become a new man but his sons and daughters were certainly different than if they would have been raised in Italy. On the other hand, the upbringing of the Porti family was filled with cultural patterns rooted from Lena and Giovanni's Calabrian origins. Those cultural traits that remained through the years are what some social scientists would define as their ethnicity.

The U.S. Census Bureau was accurate in its perceptions that second generation Italian Americans should not be defined as native stock despite their birth in this country. The upbringing of the Italian Americans in Des Moines was very much flavored by the culture of their parents. However, the extent to which they maintain their ethnicity should not be confused with their loyalty to the United States\(^\text{53}\). What the Census Bureau fails to

\(^{53}\)According to "The American Citizen," the Italian newspaper in Des Moines, the sons and daughters of these immigrants did not hesitate to fight for their country during World War II regardless of the fact they would be fighting against Italy.
communicate is which cultural traits make one a native-born American. It has been easier to define the different ethnics features.

Italian Americans, according to the literature, are working class, familialistic and patriarchal. Those Americans of Italian descent who no longer identify with those designated factors are described as having assimilated into mainstream Anglo-Saxon American culture. The problem with this approach is that those broad categories do not really describe the complex set of behaviors occurring in first and second generation Italian American families, in which traces can be found within the third and fourth generations. As mentioned in the introduction, ethnics were usually defined through a comparison with the mainstream culture rather than from the viewpoint of their own behavior and thoughts, or emic perspective. These traits can only be detected through long-range qualitative data collection.

_Working class?_ The Italian Americans are not necessarily working class and movement from one economic status to the next does not signify a decrease in ethnicity. Fifty percent of the Italians in Des Moines were business owners like the Porti family54. The other half were laborers. When one looks at the long list of occupations of the second generation, they preferred self-employment. This is consistent with what is known about traditional Calabrian culture (Arlacchi 1984). Occupation and perceived level of ethnicity do not seem to have a relationship within the Des Moines population. Despite being a dentist and living in one of the more affluent areas in a Des Moines suburb, Frank Porti identifies himself as an Italian American and has even made the trip back to Italy traveling south to Calabria. The Porti family went from the lean days during the Depression, to the years before Lena’s death when they were landlords (in addition to grocers) without a perceivable difference in their “ethnic” behavior. The second to the youngest daughter Joan experienced many of the same familial patterns concerning food and social networking that the oldest brother Michael described. The city of Des Moines

54See Appendix One.
had economic opportunities and land available to the Calabrian immigrants, which enabled them to have a rather smooth transition from the old country to the new while maintaining many of their traditions. More in-depth studies are needed of Italian American experiences in non-industrial locations to see how different Italian regional cultures expressed themselves.

_Patriarchal?_ Italian American families are not necessarily male-dominated. It is very common that in cultures described as patriarchal there are always exceptions to the rule. The Italians have a strong tradition of patriarchal behavior but now specific regional studies imply that this is not always the case. In Des Moines, there seems to be a relationship between the male-domination of the family and whether they owned a family business. The children of laborers tended to describe their fathers as the dominant figure in the family with the outside world, disciplinary at home, but mother-centered. Those whose families’ owned businesses, in which the mother worked, tended to be more egalitarian. The Porti family was most certainly mother controlled. In fact, as my Uncles Michael and Frank pointed out, my grandmother came from a family of controlling females. Even my great-grandmother worked a stand in the City Market. If in the second and third generations, the role of the father seems diminished, it is not a sign of a decrease in ethnicity but perhaps an indicator that those social patterns were never in place. Patriarchal is seen as the norm and all variations are seen as deviations and necessary adaption from the ideal condition. This is a very phalocentric interpretation of social structures. Maybe it is time to construct new paradigms in regards to family relationships that allow for the variations found in cultures like the Italians.

_Familialism?_ Italians Americans are strongly familial. We teach in our introductory anthropology courses that the family is one of the earliest social structures know to humanity. Historically, Italians relied on the family as the only permanent and dependable social structure during times of government upheavals and invasions. In contrast with this strong familialism, many immigrants left mothers, fathers and siblings behind to find economic and social status in the Americas. In Des Moines, settlement
patterns followed familial and village ties. The Italians in Des Moines, many of which were single men, in the absence of family, formed fictive bonds with members of their home villages. All of the interviewees remembered their parents sent money and clothing to families in Italy. Almost all of Lena and John Porti’s socializing was done with family or folks from Belsito. Lena had many relationships with “Americans” but those were mainly business. The Porti family story shows very clearly the extent and impact each individual had on the family, and in return, how the family influenced the behavior of the individual. Even today, some of the Porti siblings interact with each other on a monthly if not a weekly basis, particularly those still living in Des Moines. Many of the third generations cousins living in Des Moines see each other with frequency. More important than the extent that family ties are maintained, is the degree to which the Porti family was expected to sacrifice their individuality for the good of the whole. Some of the siblings, like Frank and John, escaped this duty because they added to the family honor through their sports and academics. In reading the texts, it becomes clearer the pressures felt by several of the siblings in issues concerning maintenance of family harmony and security. Not only does the Porti’s story illustrate the connection between family and ethnicity, but it also is a good indicator of the complexities of interactions among family members during a time period of United States history that contains more myths of family life than facts.

Based on my research, the following are some of the additional characteristics that describe the second generation Italians in Des Moines: 1) they are hardworking at whatever job they do; 2) they prefer to eat some form of pasta over any other food item; 3) they have a good sense of humor and ability to laugh at themselves and their circumstances; 4) they are not, at least as far as this study indicates, mafia-associated, or

55 I can not remember the number of times I have been told by one sibling or another that we are family and there is not much we would not do for each other. Despite the overall comfort it offers, it has been a somewhat suffocation concept at times, especially when contrasted with mainstream American values of individualism.
even interested in those sorts of familial ties; 5) they enjoy eating and talking about food consumption and food preparation - this plays an important role in their maintenance of family and social ties; 6) they have a huge pride in their family and their successes; 7) they can be emotional and extremely expressive; 8) they enjoyed yearly gardens, with tomatoes and peppers as the main crops grown; 9) they attended Catholic schooling, at least grade school, and are strong members of the different Catholic churches throughout the city; and 10) organization membership went along with family ties and have resulted in frequent disagreements and lack of unity among the varying Italian American organizations in the city (in general, Italians are not joiners)\textsuperscript{56}.

All of the above factors have changed somewhat over time in the Porti family but I wonder if it is due to a process of Americanization or just a natural change as a family goes through a progression from a peasant to urban/middle class status. I found it interesting that during my two subsequent stays in Belsito, I notice a similar change occurring within that population. As the family’s economic status improved, some of the adaptive peasant cultural traits were being abandoned. I guess it could be argued that through the enculturation of television (in which most of what they watch is imported from the United States), they too, are experiencing a process of Americanization. In five years time, the family with whom I was staying, would acquire a telephone and a good television. Those two items greatly reduced the level of social interactions on the part of individuals in the family and the community members in Belsito. On the other hand, the telephone now enabled them to maintain stronger ties with their daughter in Germany. Television in Italy is doing a good job of acculturating all the regions and their languages to mainstream Italian culture with the hopes of forming a strong national image. So like the Italians in Des Moines have changed over time, so have the Calabrians. They are losing their language and many of their ways to the mainstream culture. In order to

\textsuperscript{56}See Appendix One for a more detailed and general description of the childhoods of the second generation Italian Americans in Des Moines.
understand this process of acculturation, it would be extremely interesting to compare the life history of the Porti family with their same generation cousins in Calabria.

**Ethnogenesis and future generations**

Recently, my seven year old niece Carolyne invited me to her school in Carroll so I could teach them a few Italian words and tell them about Italy. At one point in the discussion, I was telling the second graders that they all came from a specific ethnic heritage. To illustrate, I explained that it was only from Carolyne’s mother’s side that she was Italian, her father’s family was of British ancestry. Without hesitation, Carolyne interrupted me to say with a big smile, “Yeah, but I am mostly Italian.” What my niece was acknowledging with all the simplicity of youth, is that ethnicity is mostly how we see ourselves. As my niece gets older, she will begin to define those characteristics that she would like to maintain as part of her “being Italian.” I hope she will read the life histories of her Nonna’s family and see her mother, herself and her children within the pages and behavior of the personas presented here. Through the process of knowing her past, she can create her future which will still be mixture of the Italian and American cultures. I hope she continues to call herself an Italian American.

In recent years, many of the different subcultures in the United States have been going through a process of ethnogenesis, in which they are trying to repatriate cultural traits that have been ripped from them (i.e. native american groups) or tugged from them (i.e. white Europeans) during the process of Americanization. Ethnogenesis functions nicely on the individual as well as the societal level. Rather than splitting this country apart, it should be the thing that heals us and enables us to celebrate our pluralism. Ethnic groups are no longer allowing themselves to be defined by the mainstream Anglo-American culture but by their own merits and faults. Young people need to have an accurate picture of their specific familial past in order to create a future for their children. The compilation of the Porti family autobiography is my gift to my generation and the generations to come. I hope other individuals across the different ethnic groups will be
inspired by this piece to do similar work within their families. Slowly, one family at a time, we will begin to paint a more accurate picture of the social history of the United States and know that there should be no conflict in asserting an ethnicity and being an American.
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Buenker, John D. and Lorman A. Ratner

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Catani, Maurizio

Child, Irvin L.

Coontz, Stephanie

Covello, Leonard

DeMarco, William

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Greeley, Andrew M.

Handlin, Oscar

Hansen, M.

Hareven, Tamara K.

Higham, John

Hutnik, Nimmi

Isajiw, W.W.
Johnson, Colleen Leahy

Johnson, Elizabeth S.

Kaminsky, Marc

Kluckhohn, Clyde

Krupat, Arnold

Kohli, Martin

Langness, L.L and Geyla Frank

Lewis, Oscar

Linde, Charlotte
Lyman, Stanford M., and William A. Douglas

Magliocco, Sabina

Mangione, Jerre and Ben Morreale

Mannheim, Karl

Martinelli, Phylis and Leonard Gordon

McBride, Paul W.

McCoy, Maureen and William Silag

McCready, William C.

Mintz, Sidney W.

Mithun, Jacqueline S.
Mormino, Gary Ross  

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Myerhoff, Barbara  

Nelli, Humbert S.  

Novak, Michael  

Olson, James Stuart  

Orsi, Robert A.  

Pillari, Vimala  

Pozzetta, George  

Redfield, R., Linton, R. and Herskovits, M.J.  
Roche, John Patrick

Rolle, Andrew

Romanucci-Ross, Lola

Rosenmayr, Leopold

Rosenwald, George C. and Richard L. Ochberg, eds.

Rotheram, Mary Jane and Jean S. Phinney

Royce, Anya Peterson

Sandberg, Neil

Schwieder, Dorothy

Shaw, Thomas M.
Sirey, Aileen Riotto and Anna Marie Valerio

Synge, Jane

Thompson, Paul

Tricarico, Donald

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Finally, it is hard to express the ways in which my brothers and sisters have supported me in the completion of my Masters and during this journey we call life. Frank, Susan, Stephen, Melanie, Laura, Cecelia and Rosemarie - thank you.
Introduction

When I was six years old, my parents moved my three brothers and five sisters from Des Moines, Iowa (which housed a large number of Italian Americans), to Carroll, Iowa, a small German American farming community. In Des Moines, I had not perceived a difference in my family and those around me. I was surrounded by a large extended family and a significant number of the children at my school were of Italian American ethnicity. When we moved to Carroll, we were one of two Italian American families in the area. Although we were all from the same larger American culture, there were subtle differences that set my family apart from the others. That the residents of Carroll also perceived this, became more apparent a year after we moved there. My brother died and during the week of his funeral, several neighbors brought us food, as is the tradition. One lady came to the door and handed my mother a stick of butter. With an embarrassed smile, she said that she was uncertain what kinds of food “you people eat”.

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1This research was conducted from Fall 1993 until Fall 1994. It was partially funded through a grant from the Iowa Humanities Board and the National Endowment of the Humanities. A public presentation of the project was held in October 1994, in which a series of monologues and slides depicted the life of the Italian Americans in Des Moines.
My reaction to being a "you people" was to become almost militant in my attitude that I was an American, not an Italian. I wanted to fit in with the other children at school. Ethnicity, fortunately, goes beyond how we define ourselves. Regardless of my perception, the nature of my personality had been stamped by my Italian American upbringing. However, it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what ethnicity was. My ethnicity, while I was young, was more of an embarrassment to me than anything else.

It was not until my siblings and I left Iowa as adults did we learn what a strange thing it is to be an Italian American from Iowa. The first response most of us received when we claimed to be Italian was, "What? There are Italians in Iowa?" Occasionally, I will have a conversation with a brother or sister that begins with, "Gosh, we aren't really Italian compared to my friend from New York...or this guy at work from Chicago." The average Italian American is often asked to measure their "Italianness" against the popular media images such as The Godfather movies or Pizza Hut commercials, when the truth of the matter is that there is a great deal of variation among the different Italian American groups in the United States. Anthropologist and folklorist Carla Bianco (1974) establishes in her study of Rosetta, Pennsylvania, and Rosetta, Italy, that the rich variety of Italian culture at large and the variation within American Italian ethnics can be contributed to multiformity of cultural patterns from the deep divisions in Italian society. An Italianism or identity with Italy on the whole was a very American concept, according to Bianco, with the only real shared trait that Italians maintained upon emigration from Italy was a fear and distrust of authorities, government and all those outside one's own...
family or village group.

This paper attempts to identify what it means to be a second generation Italian American in Des Moines illuminating how the Italians in Des Moines, although they share many cultural norms with other Italian Americans in the United States, have their own unique history based on their place of origin in Italy and their new homeland Iowa.

The Setting

Des Moines, the capital city of Iowa is located in the south central part of the state. The population including the suburbs is around 500,000 inhabitants. From the early 1880s through the 1930s, several thousand Italian immigrants, mainly from the southern provinces of Italy, traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, to find a more prosperous way of life. In Des Moines, the immigrants and their offspring were successful in a variety of economic ventures and earned respect as city officials and business people (McCoy, Silag 1982:60). Today, the major industry in the city is the insurance business. Like other major cities, there is a slow but steady move toward the suburbs, a movement that city planners would like to reverse through urban revitalization. There are tens of thousands of ethnic Italian Americans living in the area today.

Methods

The population from which this study is drawn consists of 748 families and individuals in Des Moines, many of whom subscribe to Italian American Cultural Center
Newsletter. Two groups were identified for the study as follows: 1) a sampling group based on second generation Italian Americans in Des Moines over the age of 50 who were selected randomly from the Italian American Cultural Center’s mailing list with an equal number of males and females; 2) from the mail survey sampling group, twenty people were asked to give more in-depth oral histories and were selected on the basis of their responses to the questionnaire, specifically on how their early experiences in Des Moines reflects the diversity of the Italian Americans.

Table I - General demographics of sample (N=62)

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age (years)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completed eight grade</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some high school</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school diploma</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor degree</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (or former one)</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industrial or manual laborer</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>service employee or business owner</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The quantitative survey included sections dealing with demographic data (see Table I) and ethnicity perception both retrospectively and currently. The qualitative data were collected from a questionnaire based on the quantitative survey results. The questions were specifically open-ended and flexible to allow informants freedom to explore different avenues of information not anticipated by the researcher. The interviewees were guided in their remembrances through a series of questions focused on parental and sibling relationships, marriage patterns, ethnicity, schooling, neighborhood, friends, occupation/professions, foodways, traditions and perception of ethnicity. The questionnaires were sent during January of 1994 and over the period of two months, 62 out of the 100 surveys sent were returned, 29 males and 33 females. This is considered a high number of response and is an indication of the high interest of the sample group.

Social History of the Italians in Des Moines

The first Italian came to Des Moines in 1880 from northern Italy. A few other immigrants from northern Italy quickly followed and they set up shop in Des Moines doing whatever trade could earn them their daily wage -- knife sharpening, fruit stands, a tobacco shop, saloon or hotel keeper (McCoy, Silag 1982). Today less than ten percent of the Des Moines population comes from the northern provinces of Italy.

It was not long after the original northerners arrived that country folk from the south, many of whom, at first, found their way to Des Moines by way of the railroad and settled near the depot downtown (11% - 1910 Federal Census). Among the Italian
Americans today, almost 70% of their parents were born in Calabria, the very southern tip of the toe. In a few years, many of these Italians moved from the railroad depot across the Raccoon River to a hilly neighborhood on Des Moines' Southside (80%). A smaller group settled on Francis Avenue, in the northern part of the city; handfuls of others settled in varying locations throughout the city (9%). Sixty-five percent of those surveyed were raised in the Italian colony on the Southside.

In other communities in the United States, a huge division existed between southern and northern Italians -- the southern Italian was considered an illiterate peasant, an undesirable immigrant (Mangione, Morreale 1992). Because they worked hard and established themselves as the majority very quickly in Iowa's capital city, the north/south bigotry was not a problem. Instead, the Italians measured their level of "Italianness" on whether one was living on the Southside or not. One informant told me that Southside Italians did not accept them as Italians. It seems that some bitterness still exist among second generation Italian Americas in Des Moines concerning residency and ethnicity².

In 1919, an Italian newspaper, Il Risveglio was published with the goal of "awakening" Des Moines³. On July 17, 1925, they renamed it The American Citizen and

²During the public presentation, as required by the Humanities grant, when the whole issue was discussed about the north/south divide in Des Moines, there was a loud outburst of applause and approval from those attending who had not grown up on the Southside. It was my impression that hearing this conflict expressed in a mixed crowd that included north and Southside Italians validated some of the pain they might have been feeling concerning this issue.

³Most of what follows comes from a random reading of the newspaper from the years 1923 to 1951.
redefined their mission to "making the Italians real American citizens in spirit and truth also to interpret to them the constitution of the United States, and the obedience and respect of our laws." In the first five years or so, it was written mostly in Italian with articles concerning news of Rome and Italy. Later issues would have more local news within the Italian community. It stopped publishing in 1974 because the owners retired.

In 1915, there were 6261 Italians in Iowa and 1800 of them lived in the Des Moines Area (Iowa Census - 1915). By 1924, the number of Italian immigrants had dropped to 4513 total, 1700 of them living in Polk county (Iowa Census - 1925). There are 2.8 immigrant men to women in 1915; the number balances to 1.5 men to every immigrant women in 1925. The survey results reflect a similar proportion of men to women during this time period. Ninety-three percent of the second generation Italian American’s fathers were born in Italy with seventy-six percent of their mother’s being born there. The immigrant’s average number of children (or second generation immigrants) that lived to age twenty was 5.45 (Table II).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th># of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second</td>
<td>5.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the second generation Italian Americans sampled grew up during the Depression. Their fathers worked a variety of jobs trying to feed their families. The number of times fathers changed jobs and the amount of time not working each year was not obvious in the quantitative questionnaire. Most answered the question with one occupation per father. In the longer interviews, it became apparent that while many of the fathers came to Des Moines working on the railroad, they quickly changed jobs and would switch jobs on an average of two to three times during their lifetime. Many of the fathers were seasonal workers spending several months every year unemployed. One-third (32.3%) of the fathers were grocers, almost one-fifth (17.8%) worked some trade (i.e. candy maker, iron welder, shoe repair, tailor, etc.), and one-half (50.0%) were some sort of laborer (i.e. 29.0% railroad, 4.8% factory, 3.2% miners). Italians living in the Italian neighborhood were more likely to be laborers than those living in other areas of the city (Gamma = .53). Despite the fact that there was plenty of industry in Des Moines during the first half of the century, the Italians were not working there. This is consistent with a Calabrian work ethic in which the ideal situation was self-employment in a location close to one’s home (Arlacchi 1985). Italian fathers were described as emotionally distant and hard-working.

When asked to list the occupation of their mother on the questionnaire, 77% of

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4Pearson correlation matrix and crosstabulations were used to establish the significance, strength and direction of the relationships among ethnicity and the sociocultural variables. Gamma represents a symmetric measure of association for orderable discrete variables that take into account only the number of untied pairs. The measure of whether there is a relationship is a Gamma result of higher than .2.
the respondents described their mother as a homemaker. However, it became apparent in the qualitative interviews that if there was a family business, the wife was working there with her husband. Several of the women took in work (laundry and sewing) in the homes, while others rented rooms to borders. Many of the stands in the year-round City Market were run by Italian American women. This, too, can be traced to their Calabrian origins. They came from a situation where necessity had them working side by side with their husbands on the land. It is estimated in Calabria that 34% of all peasant workers were women (Arlacchi 1985). Italian women in Des Moines were more likely to work outside the home if they did not live in the Italian neighborhood (Gamma = .36). The Italian mothers in Des Moines were described as extremely hard workers. They had the major responsibility for the upbringing and discipline of the children along with contributing to the overall financial survival of the family. Husbands and wives seemed to maintain a balance of power within many of the households. The typical patriarchal structure does not seem in place within this population of Italian Americans.

Life for the average Italian family centered on the home. Most of the literature on southern Italy suggests that it was the fundamental unit of social structure (Arlacchi 1983; Johnson 1985; Mangione and Morreale 1992; Rolle 1980; Yans-McLaughlin 1971). In traditional Calabrian family, hierarchy was fixed. Children took a subordinate role not only to their parents, but to any adult, relative or otherwise. Obedience was valued over all else leaving little room for affection. The individuality of the siblings was much less important than the overall security and health of the family (Arlacchi 1985; Barzini 1967;
Covello 1967). The “Italian community” existed in the bonds between siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles. Evidence suggests that the American Italians were surrounded by large extended families whether they lived in the Italian neighborhood or elsewhere in the city. Most of the second-generation Italian Americans interviewed emphasized that the important social networks in their lives were familiar, perhaps extending to parental friends who originated from the same village in Italy.

Regardless of what work they did, the immigrants and their children were worked hard together. In Des Moines, unlike other major cities in the East, the immigrant was able to own land, work the soil and have large gardens⁵, which helped put food on the table. Although 35% of them would classify their families as poor during this time, most would agree that a garden was one of the major factors that enabled them to survive the fiscally bad years. However, the garden was not just an economic adaptive strategy for survival, it was a tie to the old country and their old ways. The main items in the garden were tomatoes and peppers. Several of those interviewed remembered spending weeks in the fall canning tomatoes in paste and sauce for a winter of pasta eating. Whether it was working in the garden, cleaning the house, working in the family grocery store or business, each member of the family was expected to contribute to the overall welfare of the whole.

⁵A Sicilian man raised in Chicago told me that they did not have enough space for a vegetable garden so his parents used any soil available for flowers. In Des Moines, there was space for both flowers and vegetables and it would be difficult to decide which was more important spiritually for the immigrant.
Next to family, food and drink has a special place in the hearts of the Italian Americans in Des Moines. Most life cycle events involved the preparation and consumption of food. It became apparent during the many conversations with both men and women, that it was not only the joy of sharing and eating the different ethnic foods, but the time spent with family and friends preparing the goods. On the average, the second generation Italian Americans remember eating pasta at least four times a week. For some it was daily. Another particularly Calabrian custom remembered was baking bread in outdoor brick ovens on the Southside. Today, there are only one or two of these ovens in operation. Most strongly agree that food is a important indicator of ethnicity.

Weddings and baptisms were times for the families to reinforce and build kinship bonds. Both a child’s godparent and their maid of honor or best man were referred to as a cummadi and cumbadi, acknowledging that it was more of a relationship between the adults. Those people were very important in the parents’ and child’s lives. One interviewee said that it was almost as if the child was adopted by the godparents.

Whereas weddings and baptisms were a celebration of life, funerals were a time of great mourning and bereavement. Regardless of the emotions involved, these were events that drew families and communities together. The wakes were three days long and the family and friends stayed awake the night through wailing, moaning and chanting. Many remember the old-time funerals as horrible because of the degree of crying and hysteria. Several referred to burials were the widow or parent would throw themselves on the casket as it was lowered into the ground. A year of mourning followed this in which the
women wore black, behavior was modified limiting the household radio, movie attendance or holiday celebrations. The family would make weekly visits to the grave.

Despite being born in Des Moines, Italian was the first language for many of these children of Italy. Of the population in Des Moines, Italian (mainly the Calabrese dialect) was used in 85% of the households, while 65% of the second generation still speak Italian. The relationship of these American Italians, the term 52% of them feel best describes their ethnicity, with the other citizens of Des Moines was one of relative harmony with the occasional moments of misunderstanding. Those who lived on the Southside, perceived a greater deal of bigotry than those Italians raised in other areas of the city. Derogatory name calling like “wop” and “dago” was experienced on some level or another by every person interviewed. My grandfather americanized his last name on his grocery store in hopes of preventing further vandalism to his window.

The Italian communities throughout the United States were not, for the most part, church-centered enclaves. Based on the immigrants experiences in the old country, the Church was viewed as a wealthy, distant, landlord and feared authority figure by the villagers. When they arrived in America, they found a Church with an Irish power structure firmly in place. Because of their contempt, distrust and lack of financial contributions to the Church, Italians were forced to attend Mass in the basements of some churches (Vecoli 1969; McBride 1981). In 1906, St. Anthony’s Roman Catholic Church was completed at the corner of SW 1st and Indianola, in the heart of Des Moines’ Southside. Regardless of its locality and the mainly Italian population, Irish Catholic
priests ran the Church at first. True to form, the immigrants attendance at church activities was not regular. Many of the fathers only went to church for three reasons: baptisms, weddings and funerals. Their children, on the other hand, were raised to be devout Catholics. Their enculturation to the Catholic faith can be contributed more to their enrollment in the different Catholic grade schools in the city, more than from their parents’ influences. They attended Church every Sunday from the encouragement (and sometimes fear of reproachment) of the nuns that taught at their school.

During the early turn-of-the century, there was a move to take advantage of the Italians discontent and isolation from mainstream Catholicism by converting them to the Protestant faith (McBride 1981). Des Moines was touched by this movement. Early editions of “The American Citizen” listed a Chiesa Evangelica Presbiteriana at S.E 2nd and Dunham Avenue. By 1931, the church’s name was changed to the Italian Presbyterian Church with one service in Italian. The Protestant movement was mostly unsuccessful in the United States because Italians insisted on remaining Catholic but on their own terms. Ninety-seven percent of second generation American Italians in Des Moines claim to be Catholic with 82% of them attending Mass regularly.

To their parents, religiosity was intense, but not confined to the Catholic Church. They continued to practice a somewhat preChristian folk religion (Vecoli 1969; McBride 1981). Italians thought themselves surrounded by mystic forces which were constantly influencing their lives for good or ill. Two prevalent examples of these mystic forces in Des Moines is belief in the affascinata and the mal’occhio, practiced mainly by those
immigrants from Calabria, Abruzzi-Molise or Sicily. Affascinata was described as an unintentional curse based on jealousy and envy. Anything from headaches to an inability to conceive a child was blamed on the affascinata. The means of cure depended on the immigrant’s Italian origin. In Calabria, the cure is conducted through a series of yawns, prayers and rubbing the sign of the cross three times on the victim’s forehead. One common ground shared by all believers in affascinata is that the cure can only be learned on Christmas Eve.

It appears that women who were raised on the Southside perceived that their behavior was restricted by parents during their teen years. Many remember that their dates were chaperoned by younger or older brothers. The men also remember that their sisters were given less freedom than they were. In the early days prior to World War II, many of the marriages were still being arranged by the parents. After marriage, many newlyweds practiced patrilocality for a few years until money could be saved to establish their own households. Despite the perception of “Italianness” being stronger depending on area of residency, there was no relationship at all between living in the Southside Italian community and anywhere else in Des Moines as far as whether one married Italian or not. Sixty percent of the second generation Italians married within their ethnic group.

During my stay in Belsito, Calabria, in the summer of 1994, it appeared that fear of the affascinata was directly linked to a family’s perception of prosperity. The more prosperous they viewed their situation, the more suspect they were of others jealousy. In young unmarried females, it is almost considered a compliment to be affascinata. The same is true in Des Moines. One interviewee told me that she swore her sister-in-laws always thought they were affascinata because they were so beautiful.
Of that sixty percent, more women than men married ethnic Italian American (Gamma = .77). Those marrying ethnic Italian, tended to have more children (Gamma = .35).

**Ethnicity: Retrospective and Contemporary**

During the last two decades, many social scientists have attempted to measure ethnicity using different ethnic identification scales that are based on a complex set of elements that look at cultural and national associations and values. This study proves to be no exception. I have attempted to measure some degree of ethnicity in my sample group by compiling both a retrospective scale and a contemporary scale.

The retrospective scale, or childhood ethnic factor scale, is based on factors that the literature suggests are the greatest indicators of ethnicity. The retrospective scale used questions based on childhood behavior, i.e. if Italian was spoken in home, if friends were Italian, if lived around extended family, if spouse was/is Italian, if holidays held ethnic significance, and if parents wanted Italian matches. According to many sources (Johnson 1985; Mangione and Morreale 1992; Rolle 1980; Yans-McLaughlin 1971), another strong indicator of ethnicity is whether one lives in the Italian neighborhood. My qualitative interviews suggest that locality had little effect on ethnic behavior. I chose to leave this question from my scale so I could run a cross tabulation to see if living in the Italian neighborhood had any impact on the factors I included in the scale and discovered that it did not (see Table III).

The contemporary scale was based on Sandberg's (1974) group cohesiveness scale
which was originally composed to study ethnicity among Polish Americans, but has since been applied to other ethnic groups including Italian Americans. Sandberg's scale is composed of thirty statements that measure attitudes toward aspects of the ethnic group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table III - Ethnic Characteristics Retrospectively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was Italian spoken at home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where you raised around a large extended family, i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were your friends ethnic Italian?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there anything ethnically significant in the way you celebrated holidays when you were young?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your parents think it was important to marry an ethnic Italian?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your spouse ethnic Italian?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are three subscales that focus on attitudes toward local ethnic institutes and traditions, the degree of cohesion on a national scale and the importance of ethnic religious institutes. I left all the questions concerning religious institutions off my questionnaire. This was based on the literature that suggests Italian Americans have consistently had a awkward relationship with American religious institutions and in many areas did not seek or have their own churches. For other ethnic groups, continued alliance with ethnic churches could be a good indication of ethnicity. With the Italian Americans, alliance with a church was important but not whether it was an Italian one or not. I also added two of my own statements that measured attitude toward ethnic foods. I did not include those in the scoring of the scale (see Table IV).

Both scales were analyzed in relationship to the following variables: age, gender, education and ethnic identification. I then compared my findings to a 1984 study by John Patrick Roche who used Sandberg’s scale to measure the ethnicity and acculturation among a group of multi-generational Italian Americans in Providence, Rhode Island. Because my questionnaires were only administered to second generation Italian Americans, I was unable to do a comparison of the findings across generation. However, Roche divided his results by first, second and third generation immigrants and separated the religious scale from the national and cultural ones, enabling me to do a comparison.

**Age.** Despite the fact, that there is no indication that the age of the respondent has any impact on the childhood ethnic factor scale, a positive relationship can definitely be drawn from Sandberg’s scale. The older the respondent, the higher their level of ethnicity
(Gamma = .54). This is consistent with Roche's (1984) findings. A couple of conclusions can be drawn concerning the difference between the retrospective

Table IV - Ethnic Cohesiveness Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The public schools should teach more about the contributions of Italian people to America.</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations which carry on the Italian culture are important.</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian music makes me want to dance.</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t need centers where our young people can learn about the Italian culture.</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should be willing to give money to preserve the Italian tradition.</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t need to know the history of the Italian people.</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Italian tradition should be carried on by our young people.</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our children should learn to speak Italian.</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food is an important part of ethnic tradition.</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important for our young people to cook Italian foods.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t need stronger organizations to express the view of Italian Americans.</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Italian neighborhood is a friendlier place to live.</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feeling for the Italian people is “in the blood.”</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel more comfortable with Italian people.</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jokes about Italians bother me.</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you are in trouble, you cannot count on Italian people to help you.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is better to marry someone of your own nationality.</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would vote for an Italian political candidate rather than any other nationality regardless of political party.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can be for your own people first and still be a good American.</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale items range from 1 ‘strongly agree’ to 6 ‘strongly disagree’.
scale and the ethnic cohesiveness scale: 1) there is no relationship between childhood behaviors and old age perspectives; or 2) older people are more sentimental.

**Gender.** In accordance with Roche’s study, I find that in the ethnic cohesiveness scale that there is no relationship between gender and level of ethnicity. However, the childhood factors indicate that women had a more ethnic experience in their youth than the men. This is reflected in the fact that, as mentioned earlier, a higher number of women married another ethnic Italian Americans than the men.

**Education.** Contrary to Roche’s sample that found those with less years of schooling issued a higher level of ethnic response, this study reveals that level of education has little connection with level of ethnicity. However, on the childhood ethnic factor scale, a higher level of education is associated with a lower number (Gamma = .5). This suggests that education does not affect one’s feelings toward ethnicity, but being raised ethnic Italian influenced a person’s choice to attend college. In other words, being raised ethnic Italian influenced a person’s choice not to attend college and not that attending college resulted in a lower level of perceived ethnicity as Roche concluded.

**Ethnic Identification.** Among the population in Des Moines, the level of ethnicity is not at all reflected in the respondent’s ethnic identification of “American” or “Italian American”. In this case, Roche found a significant relationship between the two suggesting that those that called themselves “Italian American” scored much higher on the scale than those who called themselves “american”. On the other hand I found in Des Moines that if a person was raised ethnic Italian, they were more likely to identify
themselves as “Italian,” “Italian American” or “American Italian” (Gamma = .47). This indicates that how one is raised influences how they view themselves as adults.

It is interesting to note that my added statements on the importance of food to ethnicity received the highest levels of response (1.6, 1=strongly agrees) than any of the other statements. Folklorist Sabina Magliocco (1993) suggests that food is an “immediate part of daily life that its communicative powers are often taken for granted”. Individual identities of Italian Americans have been maintained and communicated to non-Italians mainly through their foodways. It is central to many key life cycle events of the typical Italian American: baptisms, weddings, funerals, holidays and family reunions. The Sandberg’s group cohesiveness scale does not include any reference to food or food productions despite its importance to ethnicity.

Conclusions

Several factors can explain the differing results between Roche’s study and this one. First of all, his sample group was drawn from Italian Americans living in two different suburbs of Providence, Rhode Island; my study samples was drawn from Italians living in both the suburbs and the city of Des Moines, with a large percent still living in the Southside Italian neighborhood. The differing social histories of the Italian Americans being raised in an east coast city or a midwest one, would need to be studied to help explain the variation in responses. This paper shows the factors that makes growing up Italian American in Des Moines, Iowa, a unique experience. It also shows those cultural
traits shared on a larger scale across the United States. Secondly, I left out all the questions concerning religious affiliation and organizations as a weak indicator of ethnicity for Italian Americans. This is especially obvious when one analyses the text from the longer in-dept interviews. Church and religion takes almost a secondary position to family and food in the sample group.

Finally, one of the biggest problems with Sandberg’s ethnic cohesiveness scale as an indicator of ethnicity is that this study, and other quantitative studies of Italian Americans, reveal that for many children of Italian immigrants, ethnic cohesiveness is more related to the family than any other institutions. In Des Moines, there were several Italian American clubs in which membership was more based on family and place of origin in Italy than anything else. In recent years, there has been an attempt to merge the clubs, but not without a lot of internal fighting. The major concern against unification is the decision at to which family would be in charge of the organizations. The divisions in the community are along family lines, both historically and contemporarily. Even despite these conflicts, several of those interviewed said that they still felt more comfortable around another Italian, than anyone else. Bearing this in mind, perhaps Sandberg’s scale is not looking at the right factors in which to measure ethnic Italians’ Americanization. After all, it was first designed to study Pole Americans on the east coast. We should not and cannot measure acculturation until we understand more fully understand the deep structure and emotional connections involved in ethnicity.

A better indication of those factors that influence or define ethnicity can only be
reveal by more comprehensive, long range, in-depth studies. I agree with Bertaux’s (1981) suggestion that qualitative research describes a society, through an in depth look at an individual’s life experiences and aids in understanding it rather than explaining it. Sandberg, Roche and other like them, seem in the business of proving theories of ethnicity and acculturation rather than helping us understand it. It is my hope that this study on the Italian Americans is one step in understanding what it was like to grow-up ethnic Italian in Des Moines, Iowa.

I know that through this study, I can pinpoint some definite factors that have been passed to me from my parents and grandparents. I have read repeatedly that to be Italian American is to be working class. I am not working class and yet, I see myself as ethnic Italian. I hardly speak the language or belong to any Italian American organizations, and yet I see my grandmother in myself in the way I build associations with other people and my outlook in life. I do not eat pasta everyday and yet I know how to prepare all of the family recipes (and so do the rest of my brothers and sisters). I know that I would have a low ethnicity response to Sandberg’s ethnic cohesiveness scale, and yet, I define myself as decisively Italian American. Ethnicity is not only a blue print of factors that guide behavior but it is also a way of being, which is hard to measure by any scale. Also, being Italian American today, is not the same as when my grandmother was alive. Like culture, ethnicity is changing and being redefined over time.

When I was four, I remember going to visit my great-grandmother. In my mind’s eye, I can still see her sitting in that chair. She had white, white hair that was always
pulled back in a bun. At the time, I did not understand why, but she spoke English kind
of funny and not very clear. And she was old - which is a relative state to a four year
old. Dad would send each one of us children into her bedroom one at a time. There were
so many of us that he did not want to overwhelm her. While I waited my turn with the
little woman, my older sisters, both of whom were more worldly and wiser than myself,
told me that if great granma kissed me, I would become more Italian.

I did not understand what that meant, but it sounded horrible. I watched as others
came from the room. What does it look like when one becomes more Italian? With great
fear, I entered the shrine of the old woman. She smiled a big, somewhat toothless grin at
me and opened her arms. I slowly inched forward, more from my Dad’s push than my
own effort. As I got closer, the aging decaying smell of Granma hit my nose and it
mixed quickly with the smell of tomato sauce in the other room. With Dad at my back,
there was no retreat but to enter into the web of her arms. Her breath was a mixture of
sweet and sour. She mumbled a few words I could not understand. Her hands seemed
larger than life as they covered both my cheeks and drew me closer. Her wrinkled and
shaking lips touched mine. Granma kissed me. And with that kiss was the gift of a
wonderful heritage - a heritage I begin to understand. This paper is my attempt to
preserve that heritage for my grandchildren and offer insight to others on what it was like
to be raised American Italian in Des Moines, Iowa, during the first half of this century.
Michael

The *capo d’capo*, or head of the family, is a retired postal worker and gardener. He helped his eight children through college from the money earned selling produce from his garden. He still holds the legend in the family of being the “meanest man in the world,” although no one believes it today. He and his Calabrian American wife live in West Des Moines.

Francis

I was told by a women in Belsito, who had once lived in Des Moines, that Francis Porti was the best dentist there. He has treated many of the Italians over the years in his very successful practice. Whether it is his love of dentistry or a lack of anything else to do, Frank still works a couple of days at the dentist office. Of his six children, all of them have become doctors or lawyers or married either one. He and his Calabrian American wife live in Urbandale, a suburb of Des Moines.
Mary Terese

After more than thirty years, Mary Terese still lives in the house her Calabrian American husband built for her and their two daughters in the heart of the Southside Italian neighborhood. Not having been raised there, she lives there somewhat reluctantly (so she says). She has worked a variety of jobs in her life time, but is now retired. Mary Terese still has strong connections with her maternal first cousins whom she either sees or talks to on the phone weekly, if not daily. Every New Year’s Day, for more years than I can say, she and the cousins have gathered to play cards and gossip.

John

The most elusive of the Porti siblings, he moved to Oregon over thirty years ago and has not seen any of his brothers and sisters since, except Christine. He is a retired medical surgeon who spent ten years after his retirement, sailing the Pacific Northwest in a yacht, occasionally being joined by his non-Italian wife and five children.

Joey

Having inherited his mother’s ability to form reciprocal relationships with people, Joey spent most of his working years as a butcher, owning his own shop in Lincoln, Nebraska. Prior to that, he was an x-ray technician. Actually, he has worked many jobs in his lifetime in order to support his Sicilian American wife and their three sons. Joey has been active in the Italian American organizations in Lincoln and the Catholic Church.
Joan

Twenty-four years ago, Joanne and her Calabrian American husband moved from family and friends in Des Moines to Carroll, Iowa, in order to buy an income tax accounting business and start an insurance agency. These were family owned and operated businesses. Decisions were made by Joanne, her husband and their two oldest children. Without exception, all of the younger siblings worked at the office at some point in their lives. Today, their oldest son, a lawyer, owns and runs the income tax part of the business. Their oldest daughter ran the insurance agency for five years in the early 1980s. Joanne retired in 1991, after the death of her husband. She spends her time doing the activities she loved as a child: reading, watching movies and attending theater. Her eight children also keep her busy with a new grandchild every year or so.

Cristine

The youngest of the Porti family, Christine is a high school teacher in West Bend, Indiana. She is part of a community of Christians and helped them start the school where she currently teaches. For two years, she lived and taught in Grenada. She spent a summer, a few years ago, in Sienna, Italy, studying. Christine never married and remains devoutly Catholic.