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## William Frasco Memoir

**F861. Frasco, William** (1889-1979)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 35 mins., 12 pp.

### ITALIAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

William Frasco, Italian-American, discusses operating a grocery store in Riverton, Illinois, and recalls stories from the Prohibition years and the mine wars of the 1930's.

Interview by John Bucari, 1972

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by John Bucari for the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University in October, 1972.

Mr. Frasco was born in Italy in 1889. He lived in Niantic, Illinois, briefly and then in Riverton where he founded an Italian-American grocery store. His tales of Prohibition and the goods sold to customers make interesting reading. The store was operated by Mr. Frasco for fifty-four years. He died in June, 1979.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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William Frasco, October 13, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

John Bucari, Interviewer.

Q. We're interested in knowing what year you first started business in Riverton.

A. We came to live in Springfield in 1907. We went back and forth but then the business here was started in 1918. We did come into Springfield, and we went to school there for a while. (microphone interference) That's what I'm trying to figure out. I don't care about the days, but the years. Let's see, was 19 . . . or maybe I was born in 1889; 1894 was when I came to Riverton. We did go to Niantic, and from there we come to Riverton, in 1895. Then from there, we went to Bartley; we was only there one week. That mine lost its contract at Niantic, and they didn't work for a while. The old man didn't start in there at all. We just moved from there to Bartley, got to Bartley, and it went the same way. They had no contract. There was only work for a day or two a week. The old man said, "Hell, I ain't going to start a pay for one day." "Well," I said, "just stay out and draw that union pension they give." So we moved from there a week later and came into Riverton, and have been there ever since. So we must have been there in 1897 when we went to Riverton. Then when we got there--course I wasn't working, I was just going to school.

Q. When were you born?

A. 1889. I was born in Italy. Come down here in 1904; five years old was all I was. Then from there I went to school. (Unclear) I'm getting mixed up. The old home--the old man bought that in 1901.

Q. You earlier stated that you started your store here in Springfield in 1918. Where was that located?

A. We started that at 115 North Sixth. And then, well, I'll tell you how it was. This place here was rented by a couple of Jews; Kellner, I don't know if you know him. His father and another fellow--he died not long after they moved away from here; he died in St. Louis--and they used to store stuff for me up here. Overloading, I had no room over at the store.

Q. And what's the address of this place?

A. 1000 East Washington. And they stored a lot of stuff for me here, reason was it got so we got bigger shipments. And one day Schlesinger,

the other Jewish fellow that died, he was telling me, he said, "Billy, you know what you ought to do? Why don't you buy this place? Maybe you can get it for a song." He put me up to it, see. Well, I kept on inquiring and finally we made a deal with him, and I paid them. They had an offer of twenty-five. So I took it up with the Schlitz Brewery agent. He said, "Give me a little bit more just to go over there and bid, and I believe I can get it for you." So I put up a hundred dollars more. So we gave him \$25,100, and we got the place. And from then on we kept the storing stuff up here, but I had to have it fixed first. (incoherent) hold all the import we put in there or ration or whatever you want to put in there fixed up. And we got to storing more stuff up here, and we kept it going. They moved out-- that is they got on the run just themselves. They had a building working here, and Schlesinger was plenty. And I think Kellner wanted to sell out. Then they broke up. So Phil Kellner took the place over himself for a while after that. He wanted everything the same way.

Q. This was your storage area, and then you had your retail store on 115 North Sixth?

A. We stored quite a bit of stuff up here. One day he wanted to know-- I don't know what the hell he wanted--why we got in the wine. I just told him it gets in the way sometimes. We had to argue all the time. I don't know why. But after all, he could see what I got. "I'm not making much time, cause after all I owe interest to Marine Bank," I said. There's nothing wrong with that. We kept on going, and finally he got a place of his own. I don't even remember where he did go. Anyway, the place was left to us, and Antonacci said, "They want more money for rent on that brown building on Sixth Street." And I said, "I ain't going to pay any more rent." It was a time when beer come back. So I said, "I can't rent any place for \$250, they're only pay me \$100. You go ahead and rent it," I said. "I got a place already picked out." When he seen that I started to move out, he said, "Can't we get together?" I told him, "No, you told me then you wanted \$250 and that was it." And I was stubborn as hell, too, that's the way I been all my life.

Q. And then you moved to right here?

A. We moved the retail store. We moved that up here, too, not only the wholesale. Then we kept it going from then on. That's the way we started out, and we kept it going. We come up here, and we just stayed here, and that was the end of the moving around.

Q. Do you remember any of your old customers here? What were some of the old customers that you used to have?

A. Well, up there when we moved out, we had the Roma.

Q. That was the Roma Cafe?

A. Yes. Monarch Tavern, just across the street and Drach's Restaurant.

Q. That used to be run by a Senator, didn't it?

A. A United State Senator. And Boys Candy Shop, and Gaiety Confectionery that was down on Monroe. Sugar Bowl--it was on the southwest end--Moe's Corner . . .

Q. And you had Fisher's Inn?

A. Yes.

Q. Where was that?

A. On West Jefferson. And Oriental Cafe, they bought from us, Gingham Gardens . . .

Q. That was a restaurant?

A. That was out in the southwest.

Q. You had quite a few customers. You had a lot of the restaurants.

A. That's what Aguillo Egizii started work on, cause he knew quite a few of them.

Q. Now he was in business with you? Now which Egizii was that?

A. George's father.

Q. Now his first name was?

A. Aguillo.

Q. Aguillo?

A. Yes.

Q. Now I was wondering too, when you used to have your store down on 115 North Sixth Street, were there a lot of Italians in that neighborhood?

A. Well, not too many.

Q. Was your store a meeting place for many Italians?

A. It used to be because there was nobody uptown among the Italians. They come uptown to buy something, and come in the store, and find some other paesans than them. They started talking, first thing you know, they had quite a few. They used to start talking, jabber stuff away, that's how they come to get together. They come uptown, had no place to go, no Italian places. If the weather was summertime, warm, they stand out on the street.

Q. Stand out on the street and talk?

A. They just stand out there and talk, and maybe once in a while they come in, get a drink, and stuff like that. You know how the Italian people do. And that's where we got going up there. After we moved

down here, course I don't know what happened up there. We used to get a few down here, not too many. Cause it's too far away from the uptown. They can't hang around too much.

Q. It's too far to walk.

A. Yes.

Q. Now, when you were there on the storefront on Sixth Street, do you recall any time somebody might have had something against you because you're an Italian? They might have thrown a rock through the window or anything?

A. No. (Interference)

Q. What happened there now?

A. Well, it was on account of that Nick Fontecchio, that was (inaudible).

Q. Yes, was his name Nick Fontecchio? And how was he known? What was his business?

A. He was a kind of an assistant to John L. Lewis.

Q. He was a United Mine Workers representative, right?

A. That's the whole damn thing. That these people were against that organization anyway . . .

Q. That was the Progressive Mine Workers. They wanted him out of there, and that's what they were fighting for.

A. We had nothing to do with that.

Q. The Progressives were against the United's.

A. And this Nick Fontecchio (inaudible). . . They thought he was really sick.

A. They went down in southern Illinois. If they went and checked, I wouldn't know, but it had nothing to do with me. I didn't ask them. But they wanted me to donate or something, and we did. We donated salami, cheese, and different things like that. And that's it.

Q. So then the Progressives . . .

A. Won out.

Q. . . . thought that you were favoring the United's?

A. Yes. And we didn't. They come up and wanted to know if we would donate anything so they can make sandwiches or something to eat while they was out picketing. So we did it. We did more, I believe, than anybody.

Q. Then in turn the Progressives got mad at you?

A. No, no, they just stayed neutral. They were the only one mattered to us, the United. They had money you see. They saw him one night. About a week or so later is when they throw that--well, it was Nick's cement they used as a brickbat. There's always some old broken wall some place.

Q. They threw that through your window?

A. Yes, and broke the plate glass. Course we had insurance on it, it didn't cost us anything. But then that was the scope it was done for. (inaudible) Pete got a hold of it. This guy was one of the leaders. (inaudible) "Say, what you want to pick on me for? Somebody told me that you done it. You and one of them Antonacci kids from out there." They were together that night. They seen them up here. Tell me somebody on my side would tell us what was going on. Early in the evening they seen them two together. That's what we suspect. Course you can't prove it.

Q. Do you recall the names of the two Italian councilors that used to be here in Springfield?

A. Picco was the last one.

Q. Picco was the last one, and the one before?

A. Granata.

Q. Granata was the one before Picco. Now, do you remember Granata's first name?

A. I don't know what his name. He had a son.

Q. Now Picco, his first name was Giovanni, wasn't it?

A. John. The other fellow, the kid's name was Achillo.

Q. Achillo Granata.

A. Achillo. A-C-H-I-L-L-O. Achillo. Imagine American would be Ike. He was never councilor, though. His father was, quite a while before Picco. And that's about all I know of that.

Q. Well . . .

A. We just kept it going. And after we got this place up here, we kept adding on American goods. See at first we started with Italian goods only. Macaroni was the first thing I put in. A carload. We was buying it in cars anyway. The only question was I had to ask different people where to store it. And I did store one car that I bought out of Kansas City over where Kellner moved next, when he moved out of here, he moved over there south of the hospital on the railroad.

Q. That would be St. John's?

A. Yes, and we stored a whole carload of macaroni. It was shipped on North Central, and it was put over there. We unloaded it right there and stored it inside. Less of what we had. He kept track of it as we take it out. That's where you got there.

Q. I know there was quite a bit of trouble with the coal mines in that area, and there was a lot of trouble in that the miners couldn't drink. Do you recall any stories where there might have been some trouble here in Springfield or Riverton between the miners because they were unable to drink because of the Prohibition? Some fights or such?

A. If there was, I didn't ever know because I never did go much for drinking. I never paid any attention to the drinking part. To tell you the truth, though, we sold a hell of a lot of raisins.

Q. Raisins?

A. People bought them and made wine. I know it. We sell quite a few. In them days I could tell you who bought quite a piece. But who in the hell remembers fifty years ago? So finally, it went out of commission. One day--let's see, the law come in there--I think they cut the raisins out, and corn sugar came into the picture.

Q. Then they started buying a lot of corn sugar?

A. We sold a car a week. I never got sauerkraut.

Q. Right. You couldn't do that. They'd find out real quick if you did that.

A. Go ask Victor Cardose, you know him? (inaudible) People ask him for yeast. You got to have the items complete before you can make this stuff. I said, "Is there good money in yeast?" "Hell, yes, good money, ten cents a pound." They buy maybe a hundred, two hundred pounds. They have different places where they take it, and they use it up. What they do with it I don't know. I never seen them take it.

Q. You don't know. You just sell it, right?

A. They just say, "If you ain't got yeast,"--they takes the baker's stuff--you have to buy some. But we did sell quite a bit. What happens then? I tell you. But don't ever put it in the paper. If you got that thing going, switch it off. We had a car coming in, and the gang had six or seven cars coming. They both had to be shipped out of Pekin, and come out the same day. My car, and they're lot. It wasn't supposed to went to Kincaid. I got out there. I didn't even know they had any shipment coming, all I knew I had a car coming. I can't deny it, I did. Ours come in here, and we unloaded our shipment. We had a bunch of Mazola Oil, jelly . . . let's see, what the hell else we have in that car? I don't know, we had several different items. The corn products, you see. We had all of them in there, but the shipment takes so much weight, they

come in here. I think we had a couple of hundred bags of sugar in that car, the rest was oil, Karo Syrup was another big item then.

We took all of ours out, and the car went away from there. We don't know where it went. Then come to find out their cars went down to Kincaid. That's what they were after, you see, they were after some big stuff. Because they knew I sold all of these other items. So they traced that thing down here. Well, there's somebody on their side [that] reported it.

Q. You mean the police traced the sugar down to Kincaid?

A. Federal men. They trace that down there, checking on the railroad to where it went. Car pulled out of Pekin, then they went to Taylorville. That's where they caught them, in Taylorville. It had to be shipped back, to make a stock back. The first stop went out of there to Tovey. When they got a hold of them, the Tovey shipment was already unloaded and gone. They didn't get through.

Q. So by the time the car was sent back, it was empty?

A. Well, yes, but the Feds kept watching. They waited through some railroad yards, you know, for money or anything. I don't know how in the hell it worked. But the rail guys sit around and never work. They drove up from Sicily and other towns. They drove from Sicily and found that the car was empty. The Italians were smarter than the police. But everybody was joking about it. Anyhow, they fooled around, and when they got to it, the car was reported empty. They lost it on a different spot on the railroad. They never did find the sugar, but they did catch (inaudible). He got two years for it. They didn't bother me. I just told them what I had in there, where we sold it. They come to me, they want to buy ten pounds of sugar, I sell it. It's all right. What the hell I tell them? I don't know what they do with it.

Q. They might be making cakes or something.

A. Anything like that in baking. A baker at the time in town. What's his name, too, on North Fourth Street, and they and he was coming and coming. He made the same stuff as (inaudible) but I didn't buy it from him. I bought it from Glatz. You ever hear of Glatz Brothers? That's where I bought it until they went broke. (inaudible) Course after that I was more careful. When I sold this next car, I didn't have any more.

Q. You didn't carry any more sugar?

A. No, I get some someday (inaudible). After that it was cut down so that we have to handle it for ten cents or less. I said I would never put it on my shelf again, for ten cents right now. We quit it all together. Then to make a carload, we sold a lot of other stuff. We didn't handle too many cars then. Sugar made the wine, see?

Q. How many pounds per bag was that?

A. One hundred pounds per bag.

Q. And they were selling that sometimes for ten cents?

A. That's right. We sold one car like that. (inaudible) Five percent for a couple of fellows on the truck. I wasn't making nothing. Even if you put a hundred bags on there it would be ten dollars. It doesn't pay itself. After that we brought in Schaffer. (inaudible) Corn shipment, Mazola and Karo syrup, and we had quite a few items in all that corn products. We done good when we first started, a hell of a business. But the years after that these guys got after us. They didn't bother me, they questioned me who I sold it to. "You have any idea who uses it?" No, I didn't. They had questioned the people here, and they started checking. I said I was only doing my legitimate job; so and so was this, so and so was that. (inaudible) Can't stop anybody from buying that. Then I went out of that and went into groceries. I got in canned goods; coffee, soaps of all kinds, and matches. Everything that you have in the sale of groceries. We can afford a lot. Don't have room for a lot--the place here isn't too big. The way they were in them days, they had Schaffer's, Smith, Bunn, seven or eight wholesale grocers.

The old time stores, all of them, disgusted with the old jobs. They begin charging a little more. We got in before what's his name. He would be over here on Eighth and Jefferson. And he sold quite a bit in the grocery line. Now they went out and started fighting one another. You know how business is; you get ten dollars, I'll get nine dollars, another gets eight dollars, and so on. It got so damn crooked we wasn't making a dime. I say, "Hell, I don't need what these other fellows can do."

Q. So the man on Eighth and Jefferson was charging a bit more?

A. No, he was charging a little bit less. We was trying to meet him. (Inaudible) Sugar after all was ten cents a bag. You take four hundred bags, you can figure what you make. They just go, one after another. Broker's money, they sold direct to them guys who was buying. I didn't care, we kept on having domestic stuff; corn, beef, fish, anything they can grow around the shoulders. If I could sell it, I'd put it in. That's just the way it was.

Q. Not too many years ago, you celebrated your fiftieth anniversary, didn't you? You received a plaque from Marine Bank for fifty years of business. Can you tell me a bit about that?

A. We've been here longer than that. Because when we first started, we went to the First National. And the way it was there, I knew people was mixed here who were at the Riverton Bank. I had five or ten shares-- I don't even remember--in that Riverton Bank. That's how I got acquainted with them. When we started in here, we went to the First National. That's all I knew. I didn't know anybody at the Marine. After we got started here, George Fisk come here several times. He'd say, "Why don't you come over and give us a little business?" Well, of course, we was doing quite a bit in money with that share, you see. But I did start over there. And it wasn't long after that, just a few day (inaudible). I figure in 1918, because that's when we started. Fifty-four years now.

Q. Now, you'll soon be going out of business. Is this because many of your old customers are also going out of business?

A. No, it got to a point where we have to juggle this stuff and not make anything.

Q. And, too perhaps, many of your old Italian customers are dying away, and this is becoming more Americanized.

A. Yes. There are just more cafes, more cafes. Leone wanted to get in it, but the profit's so small, and I just figured I'm getting too old to fool with it, and why keep it going; we might as well pull out. I'll have enough to eat on.

Q. Well, I thank you very much, Mr. Frasco, for helping me out.

A. Anything you can't make out, just call me.

END OF TAPE