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## William J. Menghini Memoir

**M525.1. Menghini, William J.** (1904-1986)

Interview and memoir #1

1 tape, 25 mins., 11 pp.

### ITALIAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Menghini discusses family immigration from Italy and Italians and the coal miners' union. Also mentions prohibition and employment with SASCO.

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. Dan Horton edited the transcript.

Mr. Menghini was born in Perugia, Italy, in 1904. He immigrated to Illinois with his family in 1906. He recalls life in a non-Italian neighborhood, felt no discrimination, and became a leader in the Springfield community.

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 Menghini, October 19, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

John Bucari, Interviewer.

Q. I would like to start out by asking you when your family first moved here to Springfield.

A. In 1906.

Q. Were you with your parents at that time, and how many brothers and sisters did you have?

A. Three sisters, no brothers. I was the youngest of the family.

Q. What was the reason that your father moved to Springfield, do you recall?

A. Well, I would just have to assume, but I would say it was economic reasons, like most of the immigrants in those days. They were looking for better places. A better place, I guess.

Q. Now, how was he employed in 1906?

A. He was a miner. At first he worked on the railroad, he worked on the old Illinois Traction. They were just laying new rails for the Illinois Traction. He worked on the railroad for several years and then he went into the mines.

Q. What year did your parents come to the country?

A. In 1906.

Q. Were you born then in Italy?

A. No. We were here all the time.

Q. When you first moved to Springfield, did you move into an Italian community?

A. Yes, for a while we did. My family moved into Selbytown, Illinois, that does no longer exist anymore. Selbytown is between Sherman and Williamsville. It was a mining community there that was primarily Italian, although there were some Americans there.

Q. When you moved to Springfield, did you move into an Italian community?

A. No, then we got away from it.

Q. And you were located in what part of the city?

A. Well, first we were in the east part of the town, but only a short while. Then our home was 1926 South Eighth Street, right by the park out there.

Q. Right by the Lincoln's Home.

A. Well, Eighth Street is Lincoln's Home but we were on East Jackson. We were on East Jackson and we were on South Eighth Street by the Iles Park. Right on the corner there on Eighth Street.

Q. So, you were more or less not breaking into a new neighborhood, but you did not live in an Italian neighborhood.

A. No, when we lived on South Eighth Street I don't think there was an Italian there within ten blocks or maybe more.

Q. Do you believe that was a strange circumstance for that time?

A. I would think so, because my family had friends. She visited with them, but they weren't in the immediate neighborhood.

Q. I see, that was your mother you speak of?

A. My mother and father both.

Q. Now, did your parents speak Italian?

A. Oh yes, oh yes. I learned to speak Italian before I spoke English. At home, you see, I spoke Italian.

Q. Now, did they do business with Italian merchants because their English was limited.

A. Only in the grocery business I think. I know I used to accompany my mother to help her with her language and my dad too. We patronized all the stores, the clothing stores and everything else. Only in the grocery I think and maybe imported food like the Italian-American Importing, they patronized that.

Q. Do you recall any other stores besides the Italian-American?

A. Well, John Vespa's, that's where we bought our groceries at Fifteenth and Washington. Then when we moved south we bought from John Viola, on Ash Street. We bought from them for a long time.

Q. Now, when you first went to school, did you go to a parochial school or did you go to a public school?

A. No, I never went to a parochial school. I went to a public school in Selbytown, starting with the first grade on.

Q. Because of the predominately Italian community, you did not experience any discrimination?

A. Not in Selbytown at all, not at all.

Q. But once you moved to Springfield in a predominately, perhaps Protestant area, did you?

A. Oh, I never had any really difficulty, only in a minor way and insignificant. I've never had any difficulty on discrimination at all.

Q. Nothing as far as when you went to look for a job?

A. Not that I know of. I've never been conscious of it. In fact, see I've been in the same business now for 47 years. So I only had very little experience with my other jobs. They were before I went to high school and while I was going to high school.

Q. Now in what business did you start out 47 years ago?

A. Well, when I was going to high school, I worked for the successor of the B & F Toggery over here. It was a quality hat store. I would go to work at 7:00 in the morning, and then go to high school, and come back a little after 3:30 in the afternoon. I would work until 6:00 in the evening for \$2.50 a week. Way back when, that was my first job that I can recall.

Then I went to work for Elliot-Van Brunt Company who were the only Willys-Knight dealers. You probably never even heard of those cars. We handled old Willys-Knight and Packard, and I worked there after school in the parts department. I then finally became the parts manager and this auto parts connection evolved from that first deal there. Then when I was rather young, I had the agency for Hudson-Essex, you probably never heard of that. I didn't do too well in that. At the end of one year, I failed, and that's how I got into the parts business. I was only 22 years old when I started SASCO and I didn't start it for myself. I started it for the Reisch people here who had the brewery. They had a car agency in here, in the city, on South Fourth, Central Moore Sales Company it was known as. And in connection with that, they were trying a wholesale partner, but they didn't understand it too well. I thought I did and from that SASCO was born. It was with that parts business that was originally started by Paul Bowman, who has a real estate business here in town. I think he's still here.

Q. Now, this was back in the depression you were speaking of. Do you happen to recall during the depression any . . .

A. This is also prior to the depression, it goes all the way back. Let's see, I was working--going to school--for the auto parts way back in 1918. It goes way back.

Q. Well, then you would recall some of the prohibition era.

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Can you recall any tales, without mentioning any names, if you don't want to? If you want to mention some names--if there are some stories that you might recall of the prohibition era--please mention them.

A. Well, I haven't thought much about it. I remember the prohibition era very well. I guess we all do that went through that era. There were a lot of places where you could get liquor.

Q. My point I'm getting at is, many people have accused the Italians of being the cause of the bootlegging era.

A. Well, I think the Italians were heavily involved, but so were a lot of other people. I could name a lot of names here in town, I don't think maybe I should. But I can remember, oh, I could give you a lot of names that weren't Italian. But I also say that there were a lot of Italians in the business of bootlegging. But they didn't have any exclusive on it, I can tell you that.

Q. I have heard before that Italians had a hard time accepting prohibition because they were unaccustomed to being without local liquors they used as water, that was wine. To many of the Europeans to be without an alcohol beverage was very unaccustomed.

A. It is, they didn't do without. My parents continued to make wine just like they did all the time but for our own consumption. Many of the Italian families that we knew did the same thing. They wouldn't quit. I don't think they thought it was illegal, they just looked at it that it wasn't anybody's business. It was, but they just continued to make their wine. We had wine right along in prohibition days.

Q. Now, do you recall the Italian newspaper, La Nostra Terra?

A. No, no, I don't.

Q. I was wondering about what the position of the paper was at that time towards the prohibition.

A. When was it printed?

Q. In the 1920's.

A. I remember Il Progresso. They had a Il Progresso that was printed in New York that my family took. It was just primarily news about the Italians. I don't remember the other newspaper that you're talking about.

Q. That was a local newspaper.

A. Oh, a local newspaper. I don't recall it at all. We didn't take it at all and I don't remember who--we did take the Progresso.

Q. I was wondering if you might recall anything of the Italian community in the coal mining areas. Did they have a large union of coalminers? Were Italians predominately in the United Mine Workers or were they in the Progressive Mine Workers?

A. Both sides, just a case of where they were.

Q. What mine they worked in?

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. I know one man who was under John Lewis, who was an Italian and I wondered if he might have a pull for the Italians to join one particular community or one particular union.

A. I don't think so. I don't recall for sure but as I remember, of course they had a lot of long, bitter battles, killings here between the two unions. But as I recall, they were on both sides. The geographical area of the mine might have had something to do with it. I think that probably had a lot to do with it, more than their own feelings in the matter. But I could be wrong. I do remember the bitter battles and I do remember the killings that were here.

Q. Where did some of those battles take place?

A. Well, they had a killing across the street from the Leland Hotel one time here, between the Progressives and the United. They had some bitter fights. I remember that very distinctly where it was carried in the free press, all over the country.

Q. Now I know that the Italians were predominately in the coal mining business in this area, not only in Springfield but many of the outlying communities.

A. Yes, all around Taylorville, all these little towns around. Springfield had, I can remember, a large number of mines. One was on East Capitol where they tore down that Boiler Works, the Capitol mine was there. The Woodside mine, the one on the way to the airport, they just tore the timber down not so long ago. There's one over there near the Sangamo Electric that was torn down about eight or ten years ago. There was a mine out west I recall very well. I think it was the Woodside mine. There was another one out there just a little farther north and a little bit west of the Illini Country Club. You could see it when I used to play golf out there, when the mine was there, you could see it at that point.

Q. Now, many people have wondered why the Italian community in Springfield is largely a conservative, or Republican community. Do you have any ideas how this came about?

A. I really haven't given it that much thought, but I am a Republican.

Q. Many of the Italians are Republican, and it is quite unusual. In other parts of the country they are predominantly Democrats.

A. The Republicans dominate more than the Democrats, in the Italians?

Q. I have heard stories now--perhaps if I mention this to you, you'll think of it--that many of the Italians from the area which your family came from, which was Perugia, moved to Kansas first. In Kansas, there was a large Republican Party.

A. We lived out there for a couple of months. We knew a lot of people, that's true.

Q. In Kansas?

A. Yes. In Pittsburg, yes.

Q. Now, does that story make sense to you? Perhaps the Italians from which you came in Italy, your parents came from, would have been in Kansas. That was a predominately Republican area?

A. It could have had an effect, it could have credited us with a conservative area. It could very well have. But I really don't know if that's it or not. I can't even tell you why I'm a Republican, just because I like what they're doing better than what the Democrats are doing.

Q. It has been a puzzle to many people.

A. You're telling me something that I should know, but I didn't. I assume that most Italians here were Democrats.

Q. You just assumed that. Because they're a better party?

A. Well, I don't know; because they say that the Democratic Party is downtrodden, I don't know.

Q. You being a self-made man has been a uplifting to many younger Italians. I have heard your name mentioned many times as the very big name in Italian communities.

A. I hope I have been some incentive to someone.

Q. Have you any words of advice to the people, that they might wish to follow in your footsteps?

A. Well, I guess, all the cliches . . . I suppose. (laughter) Treat people honestly, I suppose would be the predominant thing. That's what will help you more than anything. I have established that reputation, and it helps a lot. People like to deal with an honest merchant.

Q. So, you have always felt that your honesty--regardless as to what people back in the 1930's felt that Italians are all connected with the Mafia--you always felt that that had never been any hinderance to you?

A. No, I just went along and tried to treat everybody honestly. I'm by nature an extrovert, anyway. I joined the Illini Country Club 35 years ago because they asked me, and I became President of Rotary because they asked me, I didn't go after it. Like the Sangamo Club and all, I didn't find any discrimination. I did find myself alone in a lot of those places. As the first Italian that was President of the Rotary, and I found myself very much alone at Illini Country Club for years, although now things have changed considerably. And the same is true of the Sangamo Club. I don't know. A lot of my friends just didn't consider that I was an Italian. They didn't give it too much thought.

Q. They took you on your own?

A. On my own merit. I think maybe that's the advice I'd maybe give people; go ahead and do what you think is right, and maybe it'll work out. Don't bother too much what people have to say; when you're right, you're right.

Q. You've always been an American first?

A. I'm always glad to get back. I just got back from a trip, I enjoyed it a lot. America has a lot of faults, but I haven't found anything to take the place of it in my heart. You'll find out that it's a great country. The opportunities, they're not like they used to be, they say. That's not so. There are more opportunities than when I started. Today the young men have a world of opportunity. The government will loan you money. I couldn't raise \$5000 to buy a business. It took me a long while.

Q. But you did.

A. It took me a long while, but I did. The opportunities are greater, they are putting young men in business all the time. We're doing it all the time. All you have to have is ambition. We put a young man in business that's only twenty years old two years ago. He made a huge success, before he could even sign his own papers.

Q. Well, I appreciate your helping us.

A. I hope I contributed a little.

Q. I have heard your name mentioned, and I wanted to come in to see you because you have really been a big name in the Italian community.

A. You might be interested to know that I'm in the process of giving away that first store I started with--SASCO--to my employees.

Q. Now, you're turning it over by stock? You're selling them the stock?

A. Yes, giving them the stock based on the 45 employees involved, and they get one share for every year they've been there. By next year they'll have it all.

Q. Then you'll retire to Arizona?

A. No, I don't intend to retire. I still have another business here. It's an auto parts business, too, but it sells to places like SASCO, it's a wholesale. I know it is kind of complicated to people that don't understand the parts business, but this is what you would call a super distributor. He sells to other distributors. So SASCO was a wholesale distributor. That's the first one I had.

Q. You're the middle man for the middle man?

A. Right, but the auto parts business is such that it requires a super distributor. So by next year, they will own it.

Q. I commend your outstanding work in the community.

A. Well, I'm not really a part now. For 25 years I was involved in everything you could think of. I was head of many drives. I was a dollar-a-year man for the government during the war.

Q. You have here--To William J. Menghini of the Springfield Auto Supply Company.

A. That's SASCO. That's a National Activist Award for SASCO. I was past president of the National Association; I didn't find any discrimination in it at all. They were all my friends. I'm past director of the Engine Rebuilders, was a director for eight years. I was head of the eighth ward for a year. I was in Red Cross drives, Community Fund, I enjoy it. I think that's necessary for success. I think it is necessary to get out in the community and do some work.

Q. Well, I thank you very much.

A. I'm glad I could squeeze in a little time.

END OF TAPE