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Paul Palazzolo Memoir

P173P. Palazzolo, Paul (1918-1978)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 30 mins., 9 pp.

ITALIAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Paul Palazzolo recalls the Italian community in Springfield, coal mining and his family.

Interview by John Bucari, 1972

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by John Buccari for the Oral History Office on October 28, 1972.

Paul Palazzolo was born January 10, 1918 in Sherman, Illinois. His parents immigrated from Palermo, Sicily. The Palazzolo family ran Palazzolo's Market and Creamy Way Dairy in Springfield, Illinois. While focusing on the family businesses, this oral history also covers such topics as Italians in central Illinois, coal mining and mine unions.

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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Paul Palazzolo, October 28, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

John Buccari, Interviewer.

Q: For this interview we would be interested to find out where your family originated in Italy?

A: My father and mother both were from Palermo, Sicily.

Q: Did your father first come to this country?

A: My father came here and worked four years as a railroader.

Q: What year did he come here?

A: I don't remember, it was 1900. He went back after four years, got married. His intention was to stay there, but the money situation was better here in the States, and he came back after he got married.

Q: Then when he came back, he was a railroad man again?

A: I think he came back as a railroader, but then he got into coal mining. In those days, why it was hard to get in the coal mines, you had to use a fictitious name.

Q: What do you mean by hard to get in the coal mine?

A: Well, you had to know somebody, somebody that didn't cost him money or anything. But it was just hard to get in. They used a fictitious name, somebody that had worked in the coal mine, and passed away. He gave a false name in order to get in.

Q: You remember that coal mine that he worked in, way back then?

A: The first coal mine that he worked in, I don't know. But his latter days of coal mining he worked in Peabody Mine No. 6, Andrew mine at Andrew, Illinois.

Q: Now that was his latter days in mining. When he first came here to the States, or actually the second time he came to the United States, and was a coal miner, and when he was a railroad worker, was he here in Illinois?

A: Yes, he was in Illinois. He and a group of Italian fellows, roomed together and they pooled their money together. They took turns buying their merchandise, and they cooked together, ate together, and when they began to get married they began to go their own ways.

Q: Now what city was that here in Illinois?

A: They started at Sherman, Illinois. That's when he was coal mining. Pardon me, he did live in Springfield. His days in Springfield I'm not too familiar with. But then he went to Sherman before I was born, about 1915 or thereabouts.

Q: So then, when you were born, he and his wife were living in Sherman, Illinois. After you were born--you were the oldest child.

A: No, I was the fifth child of ten children.

Q: So, did he stay in the coal mining business?

A: No, when the coal mines began to go on shut downs at the beginning of the Depression days, why he gave up coal mining. He started selling milk. And he couldn't get into the milk market, so he started making Italian cheese. It was this riggotta, that everybody liked at the time--and they still do today. And so when they fill up the local Italian market with this type of cheese, he had nothing to do with his milk, so he started to bottle it and sell it. His first trip from Sherman to Springfield was with eleven quarts of milk, in a four-door 1926 Nash. And from then on, why we kept mushrooming up with two quarts for 15¢. We all worked together, including myself, until we mushroomed our dairy. Then in 1939 and 1940, why we built a new building in Springfield, Illinois at 2500 Clear Lake. Prior to this when he started the dairy business, he had a three-room home, which he tore the floors out of and put in concrete floor, and built this dairy company which all of us worked in.

Q: Now, was that known as Palazzolo's?

A: It was known then as Palazzolo's but about 1935 we named it the Creamy Way Dairy, as it was then on until my father passed away. The business continued about two or three years after this, but then it was closed down due to the bigger dairies forcing the small dairies out of business.

Q: Was Sherman a predominantly coal mining center?

A: Yes. Sherman was a small area, and was all coal mining and agriculture; farming.

Q: Were the majority of the miners Italian?

A: At that time most of them were Italians. I don't remember them all, but I remember my father speaking of them. Why it was very much Italian, and then they migrated back to Springfield again. My father stayed on. Mother, when she came here to the States, was only here a short while. A gentleman named Mr. Guiseppe Randazzo who had the grocery store there, talked my mother and father into buying the store, and buying the home that it was in. And not knowing how to talk or speak English at all, the salesman and the American people who did purchase off of them taught my mother and father the American language. And they did very well. In those days they bought dry fish something like cod or baccala, by the

barrel full. Olives, pickles, dried herring, and everything was in fifty gallon barrels, buckets, and so on; that type of hardware used to hang above the ceiling.

Q: What was the name of your father's establishment?

A: Palazzolo's.

Q: Where was that located?

A: It was located right there. The home still stands, one of my young brothers lives there. He is remodeling it into a modern home. He's got five children, and he lives there in the home.

Q: So, was his business predominantly Italian, then?

A: At the beginning it was Italian, but then it got mixed Italian and American. There was a lot of Mexicans. We had a section gang there. The C & A Railroad Company had section cars out there with a section crew, at all times, and there was a lot of railroaders. A lot of our store customers worked in Peabody Mine No. 6, and this mine was a big mine. It closed down in 1927.

Q: Do you remember hard times for the Italians during the Depression?

A: Yes, I remember very well. The wholesale houses invited the merchants for a meeting, and they told--those were the days that wholesale houses went on cash-and-carry business basis. My father also had to go on cash-and-carry at the time, with very little credit. They were beginning in 1927. Prior to this, my father would allow credit to the coal miners and the farmers. The coal miners would have credit in the summertime, and the farmers would have it in the wintertime. And then the farmer would pay at his busy season, and the miner would pay in the wintertime. And they'd get their bills caught up before the summer lay-off for the coal miners, and the winter lay-off for the farmers. And they were pretty honest people at the time, you could trust them. I think that if you were to do it today, you could do the same thing today.

Q: So, the wholesalers did make it hard on your father, then?

A: They did. In those days they made it hard on all merchants. It was one of those things that had to be done. My father didn't owe anybody. Everything was paid. But when this happened and he went on cash-and-carry the coal miners never did repay my father, at this particular time. They started all new. Some farmers that had big farms, owed my father in those days as much as \$3,000. The farmers in those days had men, and their men were fed and taken care of. The farmer didn't pay his employees much money, but he fed them well. So he would let them charge until their crop came in, and when their crop came in he always got his money.

Q: There probably weren't too many Italians as farm hands, were there?

A: No Italians that we knew of at the time were farm hands.

Q: Now, I've heard that many craftsmen came from Palermo, such as stonecutters and such. Do you know any?

A: My father used to speak of them but I never knew any of them, or had the opportunity to meet any of them. They didn't come around Sherman because Sherman was a coal mining town.

Q: No, your family business was maintained always as a family affair. Could you possibly say that this might have been a typical Italian family business, that the father was a predominant figure, and the sons and daughters all worked?

A: This is very true. We all worked as one, for many reasons. One, because he was brought up this way and he dominated the family. He told us what to do and what we had to do, and he kept the family together during the Depression. He kept the ten children fed, and didn't have to ask for any aid. In the summertime we raised a pretty good sized garden. During the Depression years the railroad company would give people who were interested, and wanted to, land along the railroad rights, to put in gardens. This was very helpful to us. We planted a lot of gardening, and my father and mother and us children helped to process it, and can it for the winter months. We did this even though we had a grocery store, we still ate our own canned merchandise.

Q: What you grew you ate, and what you bought from the wholesalers you retailed. Do you recall in Sherman any Italian churches there? I've found that many of the Springfield Italians were unable to go to church because of the lack of Italian priests. How about in Sherman?

A: In Sherman we never had a Catholic church. People had a hard way to get to Springfield. Transportation was bad. I imagine all of them that were good Catholics in Italy, more or less had to give it up until about 1933 when Father Bertle built the church at Sherman known as Saint John's Church. And from then on we had catechism classes and so on. The churches mushroomed and they had a nice parish between Sherman, Athens and Cantrall. It is now under the priesthood of Father Mascara.

Q: An Italian priest?

A: Yes.

Q: They have an Italian priest now, but thirty years ago, they didn't have one.

A: He's doing a very good job. And we had a Methodist church there that never had a real minister at the time. Anybody could fill in to read the Bible and keep the people more or less together. They did a fairly good job.

Q: Now, the city of Sherman was probably just a one-business town, and that was the coal mines.

A: It was coal mining and farming.

Q: Now do you remember any of the unions that might have been in Sherman? They might have been Progressive or United?

A: Well, when the Depression started was when we noticed the unions taking hold. We didn't pay too much attention to the unions until then, in 1929 and 1930. There was somewhat of a war between the Progressive and the United Mine Workers. Some of the men went Progressive, some of them stayed United Mine Workers miners. This was due to the fact that they had to eat and they had children. In the town of Sherman in those days everybody believed in having a big family. It's not like today. Everyone had four, five, six, as many as ten little children, and so they had to eat. So, I guess which ever side they could get a job on, that's the way they went.

Q: All right, in other words, they didn't have a preference for the rules of the union. It was just who was the union in the city or the mine. Now, your mother had to learn English the hard way here in Springfield through the customers and the salesmen in her store. Now then, your customers on the milk and cheese delivery--did you cater mostly to Italians there, beside your Italian cheese?

A: We had an Italian section, it was mostly in the Miller, Carpenter, and Mason, and the streets around that area.

Q: Did you have some Italian restaurants, perhaps?

A: At that time I don't recall that we had any Italian restaurants. We did have some restaurants in our books that merchandised.

Q: Do you remember some of those restaurants? Are they still with us today?

A: I think they're all out of existence. Way back there, there was to be a new restaurant. It was the Clark's Restaurant, just north of Jefferson Street on Fifth. We had some of the bigger restaurants that my brother used to deliver milk to. I delivered a milk route in those days, and so I don't remember the restaurants that they had. We organized business, and we progressed and built a nice building and so on. So those days weren't bad as long as they lasted. But since we're speaking about the milk business right at the present time, there isn't one milk bottled in the city of Springfield. Not one bottle.

Q: Brought in from where?

A: It's all brought in, out of Meadow Gold, which is operated out of Beatrice Foods. I think they bottle their milk up around Champaign. I believe this, now I'm not positive. Borden's is bottled around Pekin, and Prairie Farms in Taylorville. That's about the extent of our big milkers in this area.

Q: So in other words, when your family went out of business in the 1950's, you were one of the few remaining milk companies here in town.

A: At one time there were, I think, nineteen milk companies in this town when we were in business. And now we don't have any.

Q: Perhaps it's because the nineteen companies in town were companies such as yours--family run.

A: Yes, they were small operations, and the labor problem began to mushroom. On account of this, the big corporations forced the little ones out of business.

Q: Well, I think that we have covered some topics here that have been very interesting. Do you have any stories you might like to relate? Perhaps some about the Italian-Americans in Sherman or Springfield?

A: In Sherman there wasn't too much going on between Italians and Americans. We had no trouble between us. Once in a while we used to call them smart alecks, they used to call us Dagos and Wops or something like that. But there was no major conflict between the Italians and the Americans.

Q: And Springfield is a larger city than Sherman and had there been conflicts they would have been small conflicts, and probably very personal.

A: In covering the city as much as I did in the milk business, I don't recall having any trouble between the Italians and the Americans.

Q: Well, I thank you very much for your help and it's been very interesting talking with you.

A: I enjoyed the conversation, and thank you.

End of Tape