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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Antonio Morelli by Joseph Conforti

Antonio Morelli

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Rhode Island College

ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 2

with

Antonio Morelli

April 15, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 3 The town he came from was near Caserta. He remembers that his town had a population of 400-500. Most were small farmers. His family lived near the church.
- 42 His family had two pieces of land: one with fruit trees and grapevines, another with wheat, beans, watermelons. His mother used to take watermelons to market to get money to buy other food. He took care of animals with older brother. He and one brother and one sister were born in Italy, rest of family born in U.S.
- 67 Father came from America when they were preparing to leave. He had sent money for passage. Father had been farmer in Italy. The family was poor but they were happy there because they didn't know any better. They raised sheep, cows, pigs. At age 7 he would care for the animals.
- 133 His father decided to leave because he felt things would be better in America. Most men living on Federal Hill worked for the railroad. His father worked on bus tunnel on East Side, worked for New Haven Railroad, for some construction companies.
- 159 He came from Italy when he was 9 years old, in 1913. His father had been here four years. Father had come to New York and worked there for short time. An aunt living on Federal Hill convinced him to come to Providence. Father stayed with aunt and that's where the rest of the family stayed when they arrived. They were staying in a 6-family house and soon got one of the other apartments. Lived there until he was 18 and then moved to a house on Harris Avenue.
- 200 He held several short-term jobs. When he got married he worked more steadily. In 1922 he was hired by Uniroyal and

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worked for the company until his retirement in 1967.

- 265 Trip to America: He remembers getting on train in Italy and going to Naples. They stayed overnight, got immunizations required. He remembers getting on boat, many sailors. Mother was sad at leaving. Not much difference between U.S. and Italy for the children. They still had to work to supplement their father's income.
- 325 Description of trip to America--steerage. Women and children in one large room, men in another--little privacy. Brought things they could use here: clothing, blankets, some household items.
- 435 He was about 15 when World War I broke out. Remembers parades after end of war. Depression after war, many layoffs. Remembers influenza outbreak.
- 485 Arrival: came directly to Providence, Fields' Point pier. People who didn't pass inspection were sent to New York, he thinks. His father and other relatives met them at pier.
- 575 Until he was 5 years old they had lived in a "family town". Then they moved to Cassola because a relative willed his mother some property. His father later sold the land from America.
- 615 He had several different jobs when he first arrived. He had 3 or 4 close friends. They would go dancing. Interested in boxing and in bicycle racing. Belonged to Lightning Cycle Club. Most members were Italian, but some Frenchmen, Belgians, Englishmen. Held rides and races on weekends.
- 704 He also belonged to an informal boxing club--all Italians.

Tape 1 Side 2

- 2 Description of bicycles: they rode in races. He stopped racing when he was injured and lost wages as a result.
- 74 He was working full-time, his father worked but his mother worked very little outside the home. He was living at home and working full-time when he was 14. He went to the 5th grade then went to night school through 7th grade. At that time a diploma was given after 8th grade and was worth as much as high school diploma in getting a job.
- 118 He was not upset at leaving school after 5th grade. He had no trouble then getting jobs but later he had to refuse jobs because of lack of high school education.
- 134 He considers himself self-taught, did a lot of reading.

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- 142 Received promotions at Uniroyal. Descriptions of some of products. In one instance his practical knowledge was more important than formal education.
- 273 Federal Hill was different than it is now. Mostly Italian immigrants, very few could speak English when he came. No discrimination in district, only outside of it. It was a safe neighborhood. If people were really poor, they went to City yard to chop wood and earn a handout.
- 311 Informal network existed to get local jobs--by word of mouth. He helped several get jobs at Uniroyal. Harder to get this method to work now because of unions. Was very common practice in Italian community then.
- 415 Italians were being discriminated against then in getting jobs. Not many Italians could get supervisory jobs.
- 433 Townspeople living on Federal Hill would socialize. Most people from his home area lived around Ridge, Grove, Gesler and Swiss Streets. They were Calabrian. Farther up toward city were Sicilians. Language was a barrier--dialects hard to understand. Children got along because they were going to school and were learning English. Sicilians hardest to get along with--lost tempers quickly.
- 518 Area from Atwells toward Mount Pleasant was Irish then. Not safe for Italians to go to area because of gangs.
- 550 He liked living on Federal Hill. His parents bought house on Harris Avenue which was also Italian section. Many Italians were also beginning to move to Mount Pleasant area.