Federal Hill Project: Interview with Nicola Marella by Maria C. Iadeluca - June 16, 1978 - TAPE 16

Nicola Marella

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Oral History Interview

with

NICOLA MARELLA

Holy Ghost Church Hall
Providence, RI
June 16, 1978

By Maria C. Iadeluca

INTERVIEWER: How are you Nicola?

INTERVIEWEE: Fine and you?

INTERVIEWER: Fine, thank you. I haven't seen you for a long time!

INTERVIEWEE: I should say so. It's been 3 or 4 months. I saw you last on "la venuta", the famous Federal Hill.

INTERVIEWER: I am conducting a series of interviews on italio-americans of Federal Hill and would like to learn something about you, too; your life here in general. I would like to start with your city. Where were you born?

INTERVIEWEE: I was born in Foggia, Italy, a fairly big city. At the present time I do not know the number of its inhabitants. It is a city in the region of Puglie. I lived there until I was 7 years old. We then moved north, we went to Turin. I lived in
Turin until I was 18 years old. In Foggia I lived my childhood years. We lived on a farm (which is still my father's property). We were farmers.

INTERVIEWER: Were you happy there? What did you do when you were there?

INTERVIEWEE: As a young boy I always enjoyed wrestling with my cousins. Ours was a big farm house and the whole family (my father's family) lived there. It was not just my father and us; his father and all his children lived there, too; together we were 6 or 7 families living in that house. Each one of these 6 families had its own property to take care of.

INTERVIEWER: They each had independently individual responsibilities?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, each family was on its own. We only lived together. The nice thing happened when it came time for me to go to school at the age of 6. To go to school I had to walk 5 or 6 Km (there was no transportation). I would have to walk to and from school morning and afternoons.

INTERVIEWER: Were you going to school alone?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I was not alone. Every 200 yards there would be a farm house with several families (like ours). In the morning it was beautiful. It would start from the farm house before ours. The children would pass by our house, we would join them, then together
we would go by the next house and then the next one and so on. When we arrived to school, we would be a group of 50-60 children.

INTERVIEWER: Was it pleasant to walk together?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it was very pleasant. In the winter time it was even more fun. We would create sleds to carry our books on, we would then take turns in pulling the sleds. It was beautiful when we were there. We then moved to Turin. I think our reasons for this move was the financial problem. We were 6 families living in the same house and our future and our possibilities were very limited. My father preferred to go up North to give us a better future. I lived in Turin until I was 18 years old. I continued my education in Turin; then my mother took sick and I had to go "in collegio". (This is a private school, like a convent or monastery). My "collegio" was in Ravigliano, a town 40-50 Km from Turin, a very beautiful place. I was there for 3 years. I then went back to Turin and completed my junior high school.

Thereafter, we returned to Foggia (back home) for 1 year. However, when we returned there we did not like it any longer. So, we had to go back to Turin.

INTERVIEWER: How come you did not like Foggia?

INTERVIEWEE: I was happy there when I was younger (up 'til 7). When I went to Turin, I grew up mentally. I grew up
in the environment of a big city. You can imagine how different the mentality of the people in a big city as opposed to the people in the towns. Living in an "advanced" city one grows up (mentally) in a different way. When we returned to Foggia, I as well as my sisters did not feel "fit in"; and we decided to go back to Turin. When we returned to Turin, I was 16 years old. I started going out alone. Having lived in "college" for 3 years I grew detached from my family so I could manage to be on my own. The years I lived in Turin made me realize that I wanted to continue to live there and did not want to return to Foggia. At 16 years old I started going out clubbing and I enjoyed it. If I was living in Foggia I would have never been able to do this also because going back to Foggia we would have had to live on the farm again and there was no transportation there (in Foggia). During my years in Turin, I went out a lot; I also traveled a great deal; I went camping with some of my friends. We spent one whole summer camping in Liguria (Italian riviera). We returned to Turin just before fall started. During that time I met my wife about whom I will talk later in this tape.

INTERVIEWER: Did you work then?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I worked as a machinist, in a subsidiary of the Fiat for 2 years. During this period the industry where I worked paid for my school so I got to attend school twice a week. I was then 18 years old.

At that time my father was living here in America and wanted me to come here and stay with him. (Prior to my father coming to the United States, my mother died. Some time after this, we encouraged my father to remarry. He married a lady who was on vacation in Italy. She was from Providence, so this is how my father got to come to the United States).

I remember, after having had a fight with my fiance', I decided to accept my father's offer and I came to the United States to try a new life.

INTERVIEWER: Did you come by boat or by plane?

INTERVIEWEE: By plane, a DC-10, Alitalia. I enjoyed this. It was my first trip out of Italy. And you know, at 18 years old one gets very excited about coming, a new country.....

INTERVIEWER: You said your father was here. I assume there was some correspondence between you and your father. How did he describe it to you? What did you think of America then?

INTERVIEWEE: I imagined it to be a little different from what it was when I really saw it. When different sights
of the United States are shown on TV or on a magazine in Italy, they show the most beautiful parts, the richest sections; they do not show low class people's houses or sections where these people live in. I imagined America to be superb, elegant; instead when I was flying over Boston, it looked beautiful from the airplane, but then when I landed it was much less prettier.

At the airport I found my step-mother's brother who came to pick me up with a big, beautiful, superb car: a "limousine". The car was big, I was impressed. When we left the airport my step-mother's brother took me for a ride through Boston. It is a beautiful city. Then leaving Boston we went into the country. I saw trees; a lot of green. I didn't expect America to be like this. It looked old and I always thought of it as a new country; in fact, it is only 200 years old.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of the roads, the interstates?

INTERVIEWEE: Nothing new, because I lived in Turin, the North, the roads there are also very wide. The different thing was the numerous bridges and the tunnels.

INTERVIEWER: After Boston, which was your next stop or city you stopped at?

INTERVIEWEE: Here in Providence, where my father and his new wife lived; exactly Federal Hill. I was disappointed. I thought it would have been more elegant. I was
used to living in Turin in beautiful apartments with marble around, balconies, cement houses (not wooden houses). When I first got here I felt out of place.

My father knows how I think so when I got here, to make me feel happy and welcomed, he had a group of friends with him welcoming me.

INTERVIEWER: They had a party for you?
INTERVIEWEE: A gathering I would say. All my father's friends.
INTERVIEWER: How did you feel among those people? (your father's friends)
INTERVIEWEE: A little lost. I was used to people like me; who talked like me and not the dialects. This is one thing I had to adopt to plus other things. The way the young people live here is much different from Italy. In Italy we would go out as a big group. We would meet girls together as a group of friends and even in dating there won't be just the two going out, but like I said, there in Italy, they would go out all together. Then when things got a little more serious the couple would go on their own. Here if a young man likes a girl he has to start off alone. He goes on dates with her alone. He has to meet the family alone, he has to be on his own from the beginning of the relationship.

When I came here, I felt I was always alone. I was doing everything on my own. I had friends, yes, but they were different from my old friends.
INTERVIEWER: Did you go to school here?

INTERVIEWEE: I wanted to continue my studies, but when I talked to certain teachers and principals from different schools, they proposed to take me, but I would have had to start from the lower grades. I was 18 years old then, and I would not have been out of high school until I was 22 or 24. So, I took night courses to learn the English language and other subjects.

I decided to go to work. I wanted to earn a living and start a new life. I went to work with my step-mother (I'm still there now). It is a factory where they make watch bands. I started as a simple workman. Then I was promoted several times. I am now in charge of a department. I'm also going to school to become an industrial engineer. It has been a year now that I go to school and I got a "B" on my final examination. I like this course I am taking. It is a "time study" course. It will give me the opportunity to use my mental ability as well as my hands without working with machines.

INTERVIEWER: How do you spend your free time?

INTERVIEWEE: Before I answer this question, I would like to say that during my first 2 years in America I keep corresponding with my fiancé in Italy, and we decided to get married. In fact, 2 years after
residing here I went back to Italy. I was there 4 months. During that period we got married and we then returned here. We lived where I used to live before: on Federal Hill, exactly on Federal Street. We lived there 3 years. Our first boy, Daniel, was born there. As he grew up we realized how children there are. I don't think it is a section in which to bring up children. There is no room for children to play. They would be on the street all the time and this is very dangerous. I think the environment of Federal Hill (I am not talking of the entire Federal Hill but rather, I am taking about the particular section in which I lived) was no good. Many families did not care, they were so dirty. Not the Italian families, but those of other nationalities. These factors made us think about moving away from Federal Hill. Therefore, after 3 years there, we moved to Cranston, where we bought a house and live there now. There, we had another boy whose name is Mark. We like it there where we are now.

INTERVIEWER: Your reason for this move is then the fact of your not liking to raise children on Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, that is the main reason. Another reason is also the fact that I think we all think of having the "house of our dreams" some day. And on Federal
Hill one cannot have the "house of his dreams"; because it is not the right section; unless in the future this section will change.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of this re-birth of Federal Hill? The roads are being re-built, houses are being repaired. What do you think about this re-construction?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it is a very nice thing to do. Federal Hill has always been the section of the italians, and most italians like to live in a nice, clean place, so I think that the person in charge of this renovation is doing a very good thing.

Going back to what you asked me before, I would like to tell you how I spend my free time. As I said I have very little free time. I'm very busy with my job. I am also an active member of a society named "Circolo Giovanni XXIII" which resides in the church hall of Holy Ghost Church on Atwells Avenue, right on Federal Hill. This society keeps me very busy. I have to set up or participate in different meetings. Considering this, like I said before, my free time is very limited. But, when I have some free time, I spend it with my family, my children. The values of the family are very big. Children need a lot of attention and all the free time I have,
I spend it with my children.
This is very important. Some children in our neighborhood call me "papa'" daddy. They hear my children calling me that. They know how important it is to have a father (they don't have one) so they adopt me. It is both a duty and much pleasure for a father to spend time with his children. Then when I have more free time, we have pic-nics with our friends, we go out, we go to see movies, and I also work for the community during my free time.

INTERVIEWER: What is your role?
INTERVIEWEE: I represent the italians of the Circolo Giovanni XXIII. I am also the technical director of an italian folklore dancing group.

INTERVIEWER: Talk to me about this folklore group. What is it exactly?
INTERVIEWEE: It is a dancing group which beginnings go back to 1972. However, soon after that it fell apart. We now have a new group, a very good one. We are 10 couples, therefore, 20 dancers. We perform many different dances; but the most successful ones are "la quadriglia" and "la tarantella". We have beautiful costumes representing all different regions of Italy. It is a very impressive group and we put on a good performance. We do not only perform dances but we also sing beautiful folklore songs.
This folklore group is all part of the Italian club of Holy Ghost Church about which I talked earlier in this tape.

The Italian club: Circolo Giovanni XXIII is not like any other Italian club. This one is open to the Italian public every Friday night. It is a place where one can go with the entire family. The children can also go. We have all kinds of entertainments. The adults usually play cards. The ladies get together and talk or they too play cards. The children play together with other children and we all have a good time.

If you, dear listener, are an Italian person, you are welcomed to come too and join us. This Italian club resides in the church hall of Holy Ghost Church. There you will find a friendly atmosphere among us, and we always look forward to welcoming new members.

INTERVIEWER: What is the principal goal of this Italian club?

INTERVIEWEE: It is there to keep the Italians together, to help them in case of need, and in fact, it is a place where everybody knows each other and we try to help each other.

INTERVIEWER: Who maintains this club? What does it live on?

INTERVIEWEE: We often enough organize parties. We have the Mother's Day celebration party. This is done with a big dinner and we usually have 300 to 400 hundred people participating in this party. We also have
occasional dancing evenings. We have a group play and a lot of people come to these evenings, too. Again, people of all ages come and families are encouraged to bring their children along. They, of course, appreciate this very much because it enables them to spend time with their friends and also with their friends and also with their families.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that in a way this is done to promote a religion also?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, in a way. Because people get together on Friday nights there and then those same people are also in church on a Sunday morning. Holy Ghost Church has the italian Mass every Sunday morning and this is very nice for the italian community. This club promotes the catholic religion in that it holds different gatherings for the church itself too. We have pic-nics to different sanctuaries and many people participate in this. We always have a bus available for those people who do not have access to a car. These pic-nics take place in places such as La Salette Shrine, Fatima Shrine, etc. We also have beach or park pic-nics. We have one every year at Rocky Point.

On occasions such as "the Corpus Dominis" which falls on the first or second week of June, we celebrate this day with the Holy Mass and then we have a procession which goes around the church, the parking
lot and the Holy Ghost school. Then the procession returns. On this day we have several activities and sports taking place. We have contests such as the one we call the "spaghetti contest". This contest is made up of several man, 5 or 6. They each have a dish of spaghetti in front of them. Their hands are tied and they race with each other to see who finishes the dish of spaghetti first. The price usually consists of a liquor basket or $25 money order or sometimes $50. Another typical race is the "race of the sacks". I am sure this is very common among the american people also.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that these are part of the traditions you brought with you when you came to the United States?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they are traditions that I brought with me. Another typical game is that of the "pole". This consists in someone trying to climb up a pole after this pole has been covered with vaseline. This, too, is a typical italian game.

INTERVIEWER: You seem to make a distinction between what is italian and what is american. If you were to consider yourself as far as nationalities go, would you say you are an
INTERVIEWEE: Italian or an American?

INTERVIEWEE: I consider myself an Italian simply because I was born in Italy. The same goes for an American. If an American born here goes to live in another country, he will always be an American. My children for example, are Americans; they were born here. But they speak Italian, too. I am proud and I want them to talk and learn Italian even when they will go to school. At home we always speak Italian to them.

INTERVIEWER: Why is it so important for you that they speak Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: I think that in this way I will keep my family closer together. They talk Italian more than English; so they are always with us, because outside everybody speaks only English and I think that this is a way to keep the family closer. My children speak English too; when they are out with the other children they speak English and this is O.K., too, but in the house I want them to talk Italian.

INTERVIEWER: What is your wife's role?

INTERVIEWEE: She is presently a housewife. We have two children, like I said before, so she is home and takes care of them. In the future she might return to work,
I really don't know for sure. I must say though, that I accept the fact that women work, that they have a career of their own, or whatever the case may be.

I don't believe that a woman should be just a housewife. If fact, if my wife had a career or a job she wanted to dedicate herself to, I would have no objection, in deed, I would be proud of her and happy for her.

INTERVIEWER: If you had to return to Italy with your family now, how do you think your life would be there?

INTERVIEWEE: To be honest with you, I have several doubts about such a move. I think my children especially would experience what I experienced when we, after moving to Turin, returned to Foggia and I no longer liked to live in Foggia. This is how my children would feel and I, too, could not live there. I really cannot say that I would like to return to Turin or I would not like to return. I would have to try and live there for a while to see if I liked it again.

Now, though, I am happy here; we are happy here. My children are americans, these here are now their people and it would be unfair to them. May be I could move now; at this age they would probably not even realize the move, but if I had to wait a little longer, it would then be too late. For example, my
children like different sports and sports are so
different in Italy and that is another thing they
would miss.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to add anything else to our conversation
for this interview?

INTERVIEWEE: I would like to say that I enjoyed it very much and
I hope it will be helpful to other people.

INTERVIEWER: I thank you very much for your time.

INTERVIEWEE: You are welcome. Thank you!