Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Rita Gatta by Kevin Gatta

Rita Gatta

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE  Rita Gatta

INTERVIEWER  Kevin Gatta

DATE OF INTERVIEW  2/13/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Grandparents' early years in America

Father's marriage

Family's move to Thornton, Rhode Island

Life in Thornton

Traditions and customs followed

Mrs. Gatta's marriage

Her husband's family

Their customs and traditions
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MRS. RITA D. GATTA

February 13, 1979
At Her Home

by Kevin P. Gatta

INTERVIEWER: You are a second generation Italian. Can you give me some background of your parents?

INTERVIEWEE: My father, Mr. D'Ambrak came to this country about 1900, from the Isle of Ischia. My father was born in 1894. When my grandmother and grandfather came to this country (America), they took a young boy belonging to one of their neighbors in Italy with them and their own family. It was all one big family. My grandfather, being a fisherman when he came to this country, my father — along with his brothers would go fishing early every morning. Come back home, clean the fish, and sell it from house to house in Federal Hill with a pushcart.

INTERVIEWER: This was when he was a young boy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, this was when he was a young boy growing up in Federal Hill (Bradford Street). This was before he was married. These are the stories he told us. When he was a little older, he went to work in a factory and learned a little about tool making which eventually enabled him to get a job at Brown and Sharpe, where
he worked for 31 years teaching apprentice boys. He was very proud of his job, proud of the fact that he did so well in this country. To go back a bit when he started courting my mother, a young pretty Irish girl...

INTERVIEWER: How did his parents feel about that?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, in those days you know, Italian parents felt that their son should marry an Italian girl, but he didn't go along with their ideas and he married an American born Irish girl from the Manton Avenue section that was predominantly Irish. When they first got married, they lived in an apartment near St. Theresa's parish. They lived there only a short while, when my grandmother took ill. Being an old Italian tradition and being the oldest in the family, my father and mother moved in with my grandmother to help care for her.

INTERVIEWER: This is back on Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, back on Federal Hill. My mother could not speak Italian. However, after living in for such a long while she could understand the language, and make herself understood. She became very good at that. Even during our growing up years, she would refer to vegetables, utensils, and other foods in the Italian way.

INTERVIEWER: She learned the gestures and learned how to cook Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, she was very much Italian even though she was not born Italian. Four children were born while they lived on Federal Hill in very cramped quarters. The boy that came over to this country from Italy I mentioned in my opening statement, had done very well as a butcher and had done well financially. He now owned
some houses in Thornton (an Italian section in Johnston). He was able to rent a tenament to my father and backed him up in a business venture, so the family moved to Thornton in Johnston, which was predominantly Italian neighborhood. That is where I was born.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you move from the Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, by this time my grandmother had died and the house was very cramped with four children and my father now had a chance to go into a small business and better himself and have better living conditions for his family. This is when I was born - during the Depression. We lived there for a good six years, then moved to an even bigger house still in Thornton. All during my growing up years, I can remember always being in an Italian neighborhood, eating Italian food. Oh, I can remember having Irish food once in a while, corned beef and cabbage on occasion, but we lived in an Italian neighborhood so we lived more in the Italian tradition than any other way. Eating polenta, escarole and beans, pasta and things that most Italian people had. My mother always being home - which was so nice having a mother home, instead of out working like the mothers of today. She would pack a big lunch for my brothers and neighbors. Neighbors in those days were so close, not in the sense where they knew all your personal business, but close in the fact that if you needed someone or something, they were always there. Even when they had as little as you, but they were always willing to share. I remember Dr. Fadanza, who would make a doctor's visit and he would be paid with a dozen of
eggs, or a basket of vegetables from the garden or a freshly killed chicken. I remember people picking apples to make do, CCC camps, going to factories or mills to pick coal that had been used and thrown out. We were really what you might call poor, but we never realized it because all the families were in the same situation. We always had good food on the table. You never wasted anything and only got things that were necessary, and you made do with what you had. We were all very happy and contented with what we had.

INTERVIEWER: What about tradition, holidays, Sunday dinner, etc.?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, that was something we just grew up with. We always had it up to the time our parents died. (Still have today.) We always had Sunday dinner together and after we (Mr. and Mrs. Gatta) were married, we still would go visit every Sunday. We always visited Mother. Sunday was our big dinner day. Mostly because during the week, you didn't have lavish dinners or sometimes you wouldn't have meat or 2 or 3 vegetables. Sunday dinner was an important time and as I said when we got married, it was still tradition to visit Mother on Sundays. Tradition to break bread with family especially on holidays is great. To have specially prepared foods at certain holidays. The one that stands out in my mind is Christmas Eve supper. To this day we still do it in my own family. Easter was another holiday with special pastries, and Easter pastiera – again Italian traditions. I don't want to sound like we forgot my Irish background, but we did live like the Italian people. To this day I still hope that my family will
continue to remember the traditions of Christmas Eve supper, Easter holidays and Sunday dinners. I have tried to keep these traditions going so that my family will remember to keep them going after I am gone.

INTERVIEWER: Your generation's customs and traditions in general are still important?

INTERVIEWEE: They certainly are to me! Definitely, because I enjoy remembering and I enjoyed my traditions and I continue them today. I like to think that my children will remember some of the traditions. I don't expect them to remember them all, but I like them to see how things were done, pass on some recipes and have them enjoy the festive goods, so they will pass the traditions on to their children someday.

INTERVIEWER: How close was the family?

INTERVIEWEE: Very close, a lot closer than we are today with Aunts and Cousins. If we had a problem, we would all be concerned. Always closeness growing up and we didn't have much money. Cousins were very close, you chummed around with them. People stayed close. You would make new friends, close community. Tenament living makes you close. You never knew who might be staying over. If your Mother was sick or if a baby were due, the mid-wife would send the kids over to a neighbor.

INTERVIEWER: Did the closeness carry over to the Church?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, because in those days the Church was a place for the community to get together. Your Church societies were formed, (Children of Mary for the young girls of the neighborhood, Holy Name
Society, Women's Guild) to bring some entertainment to the Community. The Church was the place for common ground. If you had a serious problem, you could seek advice from your parish priests. If you needed clothes or food, a priest would help. A Church meeting would help solve community problems. If you were out of work, the Church would try to help.

**INTERVIEWER:** If you had a problem, would you go to a priest or the head of the household? How did that work?

**INTERVIEWEE:** Depending on the problem, how big it might be. If you needed someone with more education or who could speak for you or write a letter that would help, then you would seek help from someone you knew you could trust, a parish priest.

**INTERVIEWER:** St. Rocco's is a national church.

**INTERVIEWEE:** Yes, it is the only church I have ever belonged to. I was baptized, made first Holy Communion, Confirmation and married at St. Rocco's and probably will be buried from there. You can see that I haven't gone too far from my bringing up. I've stayed in this area all my life.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your father's view on education?

**INTERVIEWEE:** Well, my father had a very good view on education, better than a lot of our neighbors. He was a devout reader himself, and a sort of self-made man or I should say self-educated. He wanted his children to learn all they could, in fact, all but two of my family graduated from high school and that was because two of my brothers felt they didn't need the education for the careers they were going into, which luckily they were right. They have
done well but the rest of us all graduated and made our father proud. He was proud that his children graduated and he wanted them to do well. I think it was because he loved to read so much and wanted to learn so much himself.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it might be because he didn't have a family business?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, maybe, but he just had a different view on education than most Italian men that we knew. We always had to tell him what we learned in school and explain things to him if he didn't understand, although he knew a lot himself. He worked with people and saw what education had done for them and I think this gave him a different outlook on learning and education.

INTERVIEWER: Back to the family again, what is your father's role? Mother's role?

INTERVIEWEE: He was the head of the household. My mother would be with the children every day. If they needed her, she was there, but if the children asked if they could do something she would say "Ask your father." Always he was the boss. Head of the household. He would never allow foolishness at the table or argument when the family sat down to eat. He would allow us to speak but in an orderly manner. We all were taught manners and to have respect for our parents and respect for each other as well. We were close and real kind to each other. We still are today. We love each other and care about our feelings.

INTERVIEWER: Was it like a family altar?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I guess you could call it that, I have never thought of it that way.
INTERVIEWER: What about the mother's role in the family?
INTERVIEWEE: Oh! Take care of that home, always there if you needed her, the cut finger she would kiss to make better. Not like today. Mothers away working and not always around when their children need them. That was the part that was the greatest.

INTERVIEWER: How could you compare the family traditions with today's generation? Do you think the families are different today?
INTERVIEWEE: Well, life is so different today, there is no way you can stay the same as the past. Once you lose your parents there is no longer a need for the Sunday ties. There is the need, but, you get married and have your own family and other ties. You have to attend to your own family needs, hockey games, basketball games, dance recitals, whatever. You don't always have the time for a lot of family visits. You can't be at two places at once. This is why I believe in trying to keep some of the family traditions alive, like I said before, holidays and maybe an old fashioned wedding where you can see old friends, lots of dancing too. "You can't go back." These are the things you try to instill in your family. Roles have changed. You teach your family to have respect. You hold on to what you can, aunts, uncles, even if you don't see them as often as we did when we were kids, you have respect for them when you see them. Visit them when you can, listen to their stories. You have to face reality, it is 1979, a long way from the days of depression and hard times.

INTERVIEWER: Then you think family ties are hard to keep today?
INTERVIEWEE: Well, I wish I could remember the cliche', a family's ties stretch
a long way from home, but you hope the strings are never broken.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think today's families have reunions because they don't see each other often? They try to keep customs alive?

INTERVIEWEE: How do you shop?

INTERVIEWER: Well, I shop at the supermarkets, but I still go to my neighborhood meat market. I still like certain cuts of meat, types of cheese and olives. You know, we are basically still very much Italian people and like to eat Italian foods. We will never lose our tradition. I haven't changed that much over the years. Sunday dinners are not always easy to have, but we try to have a family dinner on Sunday when we can. I still have an egg man and a milk man, and I go to a tailor who is from Italy. In fact, his father is still in Italy. These are old customs and I hope to continue.

INTERVIEWER: These people have kept traditions and customs going by following in their father's footsteps then?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it's a good feeling, a little bit of nostalgia, I just love old traditions.

INTERVIEWER: How did you meet your husband, and how did his family accept you? He was a different pazzle.

INTERVIEWEE: I met my husband in the Thornton area, a little out in the country more than where I lived. His family accepted me very well. They were pleased because I was half Italian, a Catholic, and I could cook Italian food. These things were important. Speaking of Pazzle, it was great fun for me to see how differently his mother did things. Different pazzle cook differently. They bake many types of cookies and have some different traditions at holidays.
His mother gave me some of her recipies. In fact, my husband's family made their own wine and this was terrific for me. I had never seen wine made before and as I mentioned before, his family lived out in the country, in fact, his grandfather was a truck farmer, so his family had large gardens and did a lot of preserving. It was great for me. I had the privilege of seeing how other Italian people live and did things. I was a very fortunate person. My husband's family was very musical. On Sunday when we finished visiting my family, we would go to his home and his father would get the family together and they would play their music.

INTERVIEWER: What types of instruments did they have?

INTERVIEWEE: My father-in-law played the violin; my husband, the guitar; my brother-in-law, the bass; his sister, the accordion; and my nephew, the drums. It was just beautiful the way my father-in-law played the old Italian songs on the violin. We had some good times. My mother-in-law would do all types of cooking and we would sit and eat while listening to the music. I wouldn't trade those days for anything.

INTERVIEWER: His family had a business. How did they differ in education from yours?

INTERVIEWEE: My husband had to leave school to work in the family business. His father was a lot more strict than mine when it came to working.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say they worked harder?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, not harder, but when you have your own business you work seven days a week. You don't get out at five, you work until things are done. (He was in the laundry business and it was long
hours and hard work.) My father-in-law felt he had a business so why shouldn't his children just stop going to school and pursue the family business. Children had to toe the mark and pleasure came later. Just two different types of family in background and beliefs.

INTERVIEWER: What about Church groups and clubs?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, yes, my in-laws were very Church oriented. My father-in-law still is a trustee of St. Rocco's Church. They did a lot for the Church. They were in a better financial condition than my family, therefore, they were closer to helping with the Church and supporting its needs. I can remember my father-in-law sponsoring families from Italy. He would give them a job in the laundry. He would find them a tenement, buy furniture or gather needs to set them up in housekeeping. Of course it was easier then, 25 or 26 years ago. People would come over in much better traveling conditions to start a new life in this country. These people were so grateful to my father-in-law. They still visit him often today. I am lucky that I still have my father-in-law, and these people he sponsored are still so kind to him, because they never forget the start he gave them.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about the Boccia Club, and some of the stories of the old times that papa has told me?

INTERVIEWEE: My father-in-law was a very active man. He started a Boccia Club and has a boccia court in his yard. As I said before, being in business, he was able to do more. They had what was called "The Shoe String Club." It consisted of businessmen who started out on a shoe string. These men and the priests of
the parish would come up to play Boccia in the grove up in
the back of the orchard. My mother-in-law would make pizza
and sandwiches. They would have such good times. There were
a lot of traditions in that family. I really was fortunate.
I got it with both barrels, so to speak. It is no wonder I
am so fond of the old memories I have of the old days. I
would not trade these memories for all the tea in China.

INTERVIEWER: With all the old traditions you have enjoyed, do you consider
yourself an American or an Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, first of all let me say, I am proud to be an American
and live in this country. I want my children to be proud to
be Americans and to love their country. I will never forget my
lovely past and Italian traditions. I am very proud of my
heritage. Very, very proud.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.