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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Carolyn Volpe Montague by Paris Ledoux

Carolyn Volpe Montague

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE  Carolyn Volpe Montague

INTERVIEWER  Paris Ledoux

DATE OF INTERVIEW  2/25/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

The "Old Country" as heard from grandparents

Grandparents' emigration

Grandparents' settlement

Grandparents' employment

Grandparents' ethnic identity

Roles

Italian heritage

Mobility

Values
Oral History Interview

with

CAROLYN VOLPE MONTAGUE

February 25, 1979
Cranston, Rhode Island

by Paris Ledoux

Where did your grandparents come from in Italy?

MONTAGUE: Now if I remember correctly, on my mother's side, I'm not sure about my grandfather, but my grandmother comes from a little town in Naples...Casserta, Santa Maria Capovetere; the province of Casserta--well that's what it's called anyway. It's near Naples. She considers herself a Neapolitan. I'm not sure about my grandfather. He's been dead many, many years. On my father's side of the family, both my grandparents are dead...but they came from Abruzzi...from a town called Interroggua (?) I think...but I couldn't tell you for sure. It's something like that, but I'm more sure of where my grandmother comes from.

Do you know what your grandparents did in Italy?

MONTAGUE: What my father's parents did I'm not sure. My
grandmother didn't work in Italy. She came over when she was 17...or 16...with her parents. She didn't work here...she hardly went to school here. She didn't really go to school. Her husband, my grandfather--I have no idea what he did in Italy.

Do you know when they came over?

MONTAGUE: Well...my grandmother was born in 1894, so I guess they came over about 1911. But first they went to Egypt. She, and her father and her mother went to Egypt. They opened up a restaurant in Egypt...an Italian restaurant in Egypt. My grandfather took a detour to Argentina and also lived in France...I'm kind of vague on this. I do know that before they came to America they went to Egypt, France, and Argentina. My grandmother came over to America by herself. Her parents either came before her or after her. All I know is, she came over here all by herself on the boat. She was, like, 17-18 years old...around 1911...around that time.

LEDoux: Where did they live when they came to America?

MONTAGUE: I think the first place they moved was Mount Pleasant...but then finally Federal Hill. My grandmother still lives up Federal Hill.

LEDoux: Were they ever sorry they came to America?

MONTAGUE: No. I never heard any regrets. America was the the land of opportunity to everybody...you know.

LEDoux: Did they have any help in learning the language? Were there any programs?
MONTAGUE: No. My grandmother...I think she went to school in Italy for a very short while...not very long at all...maybe to the third grade. Then when she came to this country she did not go to school here. The English language she learned was from other people. In fact, to this day she cannot write English. She can speak it and understand it, but she did not have any schooling in it here---and neither did her parents. They just learned to speak it here...they learned from other people.

LEDoux: Did they ever encounter any prejudice against Italians?

MONTAGUE: Well, no---because they moved into a predominantly Italian community. So I don't think they did. Well, not to my knowledge.

LEDoux: Have you carried on any of their Italian traditions?

MONTAGUE: To this day...the traditional Christmas Eve, with all kinds of fish...baccala, squid...oh yeah, to this day, we've carried on the Italian traditions.

LEDoux: What were the roles of men, women and children in your family?

MONTAGUE: The men were considered superior to the women. They were...The men were considered to be the head of the household...a very old-fashioned family...a very narrow-minded old-fashioned family...and values...You know, the man went to
work, the woman stayed home. But the women were respected though, because they had a very important part in the house... They had to cook, clean, raise the children... the house and family... that's the number one thing in their lives. If you're Italian you're expected to grow up, get married, and have children. That's it, with Italians.

**LEDoux:** What was expected of the children?

**Montague:** In my family? Well, I don't have any brothers and sisters, but my cousins were expected to go through school, get a job, be pretty straight... get married... have kids. Everybody didn't adhere to that--the cousins.

**LEDoux:** Was religion important in your upbringing?

**Montague:** Oh yeah. We're very religious people... the ones from Italy... they're very religious... a cross over every bed... statues. I've walked into some of my grandmother's friends' houses and it looks like a church... candles, statues... very religion-oriented.

**LEDoux:** Do you consider your Catholicism to be Italian-style or American-style?

**Montague:** Oh, well... I'm not that good of a Catholic. I believe in God, but I... I don't go to church every week... I'm not a strong practicer of my faith. But, personally, no--but I guess the others in my family are... strong believers in the Italian tradition. Like the Irish are strong believers, so are the Italians, but in their own
LEDOUX: What do you think about divorce?
MONTAGUE: Well, I feel from an Italian point of view, number one, in my particular family, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, there is no divorce. I don't know...the marriages just last...marriages of 15 years, 25 years...they just don't get divorced. I can think of only one uncle who got a divorce, after a marriage of 12 years...there were no children.

LEDOUX: What are your personal views toward divorce?
MONTAGUE: My personal views toward divorce are not Italian, I guess. I don't really"believe"in divorce, but if two people are miserable...I couldn't see just surviving in a miserable marriage. I think if you're really miserable, and want to do it, get a divorce. I would never condemn anybody for getting a divorce.

LEDOUX: What is your attitude about abortion?
MONTAGUE: I believe, from an Italian point of view, that where it would be therapeutic, to save the life of the mother, or if the baby was going to be severely malformed or retarded, or if someone...young...was in a situation where she just couldn't have the baby...if her parents would disown her, or if she just couldn't care for it, then have the abortion, once---but don't use it as a form of birth control. Don't have another abortion.
Go on something. Don't use it as a form of birth control.

LEDOUX: How do you feel about the priesthood? Do you think any changes should be made—should priests be allowed to marry, for instance?

MONTAGUE: Well, the old-fashioned Italians believe that if you go into that profession you are expected to stay single...and that's that. If you become a priest you must live that way. But ministers can marry, rabbis can marry—really, in a way—why can't priests marry?

LEDOUX: What were your dating experiences like? Was there any Italian influence?

MONTAGUE: Yes. My parents had very high expectations of me. It's funny...I don't know if it's coincidental, but a very high percentage of the guys I've dated have been Italian—about 80% (Interviewer's Note: Her husband is ½ Italian, too.)...a conservative estimate. And it seems that my parents were happier when I met an Italian. Of course if I met a good Irishman they wouldn't object...as long as he was half Italian!

LEDOUX: How do you feel about welfare and social services?

MONTAGUE: There are a lot of people on welfare that I feel can work. They're just taking advantage of the poor working people. It's our taxes that are paying for welfare. I think the social service agencies like Planned Parenthood, the United Way, etc.
are a good idea. Anything that helps....

LEDOUX: How do you feel about education for men and women?

MONTAGUE: Years ago, it was thought, "You're a woman; what do you need a college education for?" The woman was expected to stay home with the kids, while the man was urged to get the education. I don't think that's fair. A woman should be encouraged to get a PhD if she wants.

LEDOUX: Was Italian spoken in your home?

MONTAGUE: Yes. My mother, father, grandmother and I—plus an aunt and uncle lived together, and we most definitely spoke Italian...a Neapolitan dialect. And then my grandmother's friends would often visit and speak only Italian---it was a very Italian-dominated household, most definitely. Sometimes you felt like you were in Italy.

LEDOUX: Can you think of any other traditions of the Italian way of life that were a part of your upbringing?

MONTAGUE: Hmm... Our family used to be very close, but we've drifted apart over the past few years. Cousins have gotten married and formed their own little families... Any other strong traditions, I really couldn't tell you--other than on Christmas Eve we make fish!

LEDOUX: How important is the family to you?

MONTAGUE: Oh, to me, the family is a very important unit. To me, I think it is definitely important.
LEDOUX: How important is "being Italian" to you?

MONTAGUE: I'm very proud of my Italian heritage. Italians are warm, they're hospitable, they're emotional, they're hot-sketches... I'm very, very proud of my Italian heritage... to have been "born Italian."

LEDOUX: What does "being American" mean to you?

MONTAGUE: What does being American mean to me? Well, I feel very fortunate having been born in this country, as opposed to being born in Italy... This is a free country... America the great, America the strong--the so-called "land of freedom and opportunity". I feel fortunate. I'd rather have been born here than in Russia, or someplace like that. I'm proud to be an American of Italian ancestry.

LEDOUX: Has there been a lessening or a strengthening of the ties in your family, do you think?

MONTAGUE: That's funny. You see, when you speak of the family, well I have no brothers or sisters, but the family as a whole has sort of drifted apart. We don't see each other as much, but I know that deep down in our hearts that strong love still exists... even though we don't see each other as much or get together for family gatherings like in the past.

LEDOUX: Do you read Italian language magazines or listen to Italian tapes or records?
MONTAGUE: I have in the past, but not recently, bought Italian magazines, Italian newspapers. And I've listened--again, not so much lately---to the Italian radio station, WRIP, in addition to my own collection of Italian records.

LEDoux: Have you ever been to Italy?

MONTAGUE: No, but I'd love to go. It would be like a dream. I've stayed in touch with my family in Italy...I write to them in Italian...

LEDoux: Have you always lived in the same community?

MONTAGUE: No. When I grew up...I was born, and lived for 12 years up Federal Hill, and then we moved to Cranston. I lived half my life in Federal Hill, and half in Cranston.

LEDoux: Do you work?

MONTAGUE: I've been working at the Providence Journal for six years.

LEDoux: Do you enjoy your work?

MONTAGUE: No.

LEDoux: What do you do for recreation?

MONTAGUE: Well, I'm a newlywed, so right now...food shopping and laundry...Seriously, my husband and I go out for drinks, we get together with friends...we go to his mother's house...you know, nothing really that great.

LEDoux: What in life is most important to you?

MONTAGUE: Well, I would say happiness, and peace of mind.

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