

"AN ITALIAN FAMILY EMIGRATES TO DANBURY"

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MARTIN RAJCOK

Introduction by: Dr. John Leopold

For centuries, Homer's epic recollection of past tradition has been a source of enjoyment and knowledge. In recent years, "scientific" study has turned to oral history as a vital basis for man's understanding of the past. In line with this trend, students in Social Studies II interviewed older members of their families. What follows is a verbatim excerpt from a taped interview with a 78 year old woman, whose parents had emigrated from Italy.

Taped Interview:

Martin: I'm now speaking to Mrs. Lina Navaco, my grandmother. Grandma, where and when were you born?

Mrs. Navaco: I was born in Danbury, on Balmforth Avenue, April 25, 1897.

Martin: Your parents were both immigrants; that would make you a first-generation Italian-American. When did your parents come to this country?

Mrs. Navaco: My father came in 1887; my mother came in 1891.

Martin: Did they live in Danbury when they first came?

Mrs. Navaco: My father went to Brewster, New York, and my mother's family came to Danbury.

Martin: What kind of education did they have, and did they come from well-to-do families?

Mrs. Navaco: There wasn't any actual kind of schooling in Italy at the time my father came across, but my mother had a school teacher and she was taught in the school teacher's home - so she could embroider and write and crochet. She learned all the necessary things that the children of the higher people had.

Martin: And your father was a--?

Mrs. Navaco: My father's family were not exactly well-to-do, but they weren't peasants.

Martin: When approximately did he move to Danbury?

Mrs. Navaco: Oh, about 1891.

Martin: Did they have any trouble finding a place?

Mrs. Navaco: No, because the Italian people at that time sort of congregated in different sections and they found their own people.

Martin: What kind of language did you speak at home?

Mrs. Navaco: Italian.

Martin: Was English ever--?

Mrs. Navaco: English came on after we started to go to school.

Martin: What kind of education did you have?

Mrs. Navaco: Public School, and part high school.

Martin: When your parents decided to buy a house, when was that?

Mrs. Navaco: 1907 or 1908.

Martin: And this is the house at 22 Liberty street?

Mrs. Navaco: No, we lived on Linden Place. My father sold the house in 1910. And we had to find a house that was suitable, because there were six children, We went around looking for places and finally located this house, which was the house of the former James Clarence Harvey who was a great explorer and writer. It was built in 1882...It was a very, very exclusive street. Well, there were actually no foreigners of any kind on this street.

Martin: Were you considered a foreigner, if you were Italian at that time?

Mrs. Navaco: My father was considered a foreigner, so they would not sell the house to him. So, the real-estate man bought the house and then sold it to my father.

Martin: He was a friend of your fathers?

Mrs. Navaco: Yes.

Mrs. Navaco: Delay Street was - Dr. Wile, Henry Dicks, the Mandevills, the Boothroydes, Weidles, very, very high class people. Delay and Liberty Street as far as the church were very exclusive.

Martin: They came accustomed to America?

Mrs. Navaco: They came accustomed and made friends, although my father in his line of trade, barbering, became more Americanized in speaking the American language. And my mother, of course, not being out as much as people without children - we were six and she had enough to do to take care of us - so she didn't absorb the English language as much as someone else would. But she understood quite plainly and could at times answer the questions.

Martin: Did they ever speak about going back to the old country?

Mrs. Navaco: No, they never had that in mind.

Martin: Did they think America was a little more--?

Mrs. Navaco: They thought America was good enough and they had their livelihood here and they were raising their children here. They were very well satisfied.

Martin: At what time did you decide to get married?

Mrs. Navaco: Oh well, that's a long time ago.

Martin: Who did you meet?

Mrs. Navaco: Who did I meet?

Martin: Besides my grandfather--?

Mrs. Navaco: Well, I met some, but when he came along then I decided.

Martin: Your parents thought he was suited because he was Italian?

Mrs. Navaco: No, because they came acquainted with him and thought he was all right - not exactly because he was Italian, although they probably would have objected, if I had had anyone else in mind--you know, of another nationality, because years and years back, the different nationalities sort of - The trend was toward their own, for their own families.

Martin: Were Catholics in the minority in Danbury?

Mrs. Navaco: No, I'd say they weren't exactly a minority, but they didn't attend as much as they did in the old country. It was a different atmosphere completely, and the religion to them was in their own home--as long as they took care of their families. But they saw to it that their children went to church and attended the Catholic ceremonies.

Martin: Was Danbury sort of sectioned off, like an Irish section - an Italian section - a Polish section?

Mrs. Navaco: No not really, they lived wherever they found a place, but they didn't have the conveniences that the English and American people had at that time. They had to be satisfied with the smaller homes and with homes in different sections. But they weren't looked too good upon by the townspeople. They were foreigners that's all.

Martin: Did your parents think that you and your brothers and sisters had a better chance to make it in America than they would have had in Italy?

Mrs. Navaco: Oh yes, they looked forward to that. They knew that this was a land of opportunity and they looked forward to that. So my older brother was sent to business college and the next one traveled after he finished school and of course the rest of them went to school. They were very proud everytime they knew that they were interested in the American ideology you might say...

Martin: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Navaco: You're entirely welcome.

*End of taped interview.

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Martin Rajcok is a second year Basic Studies Social Science student at WesConn. He plans to obtain a degree in medical technology, specializing in Coronary Emergency Treatment and Therapy.