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Oral History with Gary Mormino

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It's an improbable story. As I've gotten older I kind of pinch myself. I did not come out of the conventional backgrounds. I don't think anyone who knew my situation would have said this guy's destined to become a professor. Very working-class family. My father's side of the Sicilian immigrants, my grandparents, came to Napoleonville, Louisiana to cut sugar cane. There's a lot of room for upward mobility when you begin your life cutting sugarcane. I finally had a chance to go to that village. Man, it's a desolate place an hour west of New Orleans and I think about half the males of this community of Alia in Sicily left for Texas, Louisiana, places like that and somewhere around they heard of opportunities in the St. Louis area. I'd do anything to go back and interview them because my uncle Angelo was born on the Hill in St. Louis.

[The Hill] it's a famous Italian community in St. Louis, southwest St. Louis, and they [my ancestors] claimed they were run out of the community because northern Italians didn't like the southern Italians. I've always been told they left because there was jobs in these oil refineries but they wound up in the little community of Wood River Illinois, across the river from St. Louis, entirely devoted to oil refineries. It was built for that purpose. The community had five oil refineries and you can imagine that in the community surrounding it, Alton, Illinois, Madison had two or three steel mills, Granite City, there was an East Alton, a place that made ammunition, there was a paper mill. It's astonishing this was a dream setting for my uncles and my father, largely uneducated. These were Union jobs, pretty decent jobs for that era.

[It was] very, very much a Union town as well. My father always told me that my ass would be royally kicked if anyone ever saw me cross the picket line. My grandparents moved to Wood River, six uncles born there, two aunts, and my grandfather was a bricklayer for Standard Oil Refinery. The legend always passed down is that every day he took home a brick in his lunch pail and one day they had a checkpoint and the guard says “why are you stealing a brick from Mr. Rockefeller?” – he worked for Standard Oil – and my grandfather said “I want to show my sons what I do” and the family legend is thirty years later he had enough bricks to build a house. That the house was built of wood is in the tradition [story].

My father was a fourth-grade dropout. Education was not valued. My father always thought I should have my ass kicked, I should join the army and get a little discipline, and that years later I can have a pension. It was a very large family, there were six siblings and it was very well-known that there was no money for college.

One year they allowed the sons of refinery workers to work for the summer. These were Union jobs, I mean this was three or four times what you get [working] at a root beer stand, so my father got me that job. And then he got me another job, you had to see the City Council, this was a state job, I think some money was exchanged, and I got a job working for the Illinois State Highway Department; and to put it in perspective, in those days I if I could save a thousand dollars in the summer I could get through [college] with no debt. I had scholarships [and] I went to this little school Millikin University.

My mother's side of the family, they were more respectable. I had an uncle do a little time in prison. The first time I ever remember meeting him he was coming back from the Korean War and he had punched out an officer; it was a dishonorable [discharge]. [I remember] this big party for Uncle Lou coming back. My poor mother, and she was born at a coal mining community in southern Illinois [in] a burned-out coal mining community, desperately poor, and then her mother married Phil Stasi, so I had two Italian grandfathers and Phil was about as colorful and disreputable as you can be. He had one arm and had a tavern. I had several taverns in the family and Phil did a little book on the side. He let me work at his bar; in the mornings, I'd stock up. So I had two or three jobs; I was desperate to get out of Wood River, really desperate to start a new life and I was such a loser in high school and insecure and thought I was going to be a chemist, I was absolutely certain. I liked math and science and then I got into college calculus and figured, “well, I like history,” be a high school history teacher, something like that.

I went to school, Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois. It probably was good for me I wasn't undisciplined, because I was a hard worker, but no one had ever set me down and told me about how to write, how to study. I didn't really [learn] until graduate school. I was a good student at Milliken and I had some very gifted teachers who encouraged me to go on. The reason I went on to graduate school at the University of North Carolina, no one does these things like this anymore, the only reason I went to UNC I was absolutely clueless. I liked European history as much as American history, but no one ever set me down said well you got to do one or the other. I had a very kind and very good professor named Robert Haywood who was a big historian of Kansas who was at Millikin and he had gone to UNC and he said you know I think you'd like it, so I applied. I think I was accepted at Colorado and Texas and I wanted to get out of Illinois and at the time I didn't realize I would also be married. Lynne and I got married in [1969].

I graduated in May of 1969 and we were married in June. The first car I ever had was a Chevy Malibu and we had a little trailer in the back with about one square yard of belongings. We arrived in Chapel Hill, the most beautiful place I had ever seen, and I get my draft notice. Oh man, I was opposed to the war but you know, you're married and figure, well okay maybe what I should do is go to Officer’s Candidate School and get something out of it. My logic was you know maybe they’ll teach me Russian and I'll come back and be a Russian historian and I was this close to signing if they had just, if he had just said yes we guarantee you language. I was going to Navy intelligence and he would not budge on that. The next day I'm at the UNC Union

and I see it the thing about draftee jobs and I got a draftee job training dogs for Vietnam. I had also been a Psych major; I thought about going in higher education as an administrator. I had not only been a Psych major, I had worked at a mental hospital in Illinois that they were just opening, this new mental hospital for juvenile delinquents in Illinois; these were really more delinquents than anything else. I spent my senior year taking classes at the University of Illinois, behavioral Psych which is what animal training. I'd always want to know what happened to those poor dogs, but I did that for about six months until Nixon came out with the lottery and my lottery pick was high enough.

I mean the one thing my father gave me was a work ethic; nothing is going to be handed to you. He thought you need to work and so I worked first as a paperboy; must have worked delivering morning and afternoon papers for six or seven years and then I worked at a root beer stand and the most interesting job was at Kentucky Fried Chicken, which was relatively new. At that time the Colonel had sold the franchise, but he was the spokesperson, the traveling brand. Has there ever been a brand like the Colonel? I come in after school one day and I hear this cursing. I'd always heard through the managers that no one could curse like the Colonel, that he was like a sailor. The manager, who was the brother-in-law of the owner of the place, the Colonel reamed him out. He saw me and was rather kind to me, he actually came up and said, “Son," he said "would you show me the gravy?” I'd also heard that the one thing that just drove him crazy about the new owners is that they shortchanged the gravy. We made gravy in six gallon soup pans and you simply pour this little packet of what looked like plaster of Paris and everything would coagulate and you then throw the chicken skin cracklings in to make it interesting. He took one bite and ordered me to throw it out. Then he sits me down and gosh, I wish I had a videotape of this. He said, “Son, have you considered a career with Kentucky Fried Chicken?” I said I really wanted to go to college. He wasn't mad as he was just upset and he says, “You know son, you just walked away from a million-dollar deal!” I've often wondered about those stock options you would have had then. He may have been right, but you would have died at a young age of the chicken vapors and grease.

In college, I worked at the admissions office and I worked at a sorority clearing tables and figured it would also be good for dates. I was so unprepared academically, just the idea that you're supposed to seek an advisor and usually you go to a school because that school has certain strengths and I was lucky for UNC’s strength with southern history and I had some wonderful professors there. But the irony of ironies, my adviser was a Millikan graduate named Roger Lotchin. About two years ago he retired. He was at UNC for years and he taught a year of high school so he was a fifty-year man; he had been an All-American basketball player at Milliken, but his field was urban history, he did a lot of studies of California cities but he instilled in me the idea of him getting to know a city, walk a city. He liked the idea of interviews and things like that. I know I got better in graduate school as I learned the game.

I still remember the first paper I got back was marked “passive voice” three exclamation marks. I had no idea what passive voice was. I don't think I was a very

good writer but I worked very hard to become I think a decent writer. Chapel Hill was the most wonderful place. All I have to do is return there even after a long drive, just walking that beautiful quad is soothing, relaxing. One of my sisters became a nun and I've often thought that was the [childhood] house and the city was so noisy, the factory whistles, the smell and that eight in the family, I always thought she sought the sanctuary and silence.

There was also George Brown Tindall, a legend, his text is still being used. He was the first really to demand good writing and he had these commandments, "thou shalt not use passive voice." It was also a time when the profession was changing. Anyone who came out of grad school got a job because schools were just exploding everywhere, the baby boom, people who traditionally didn't go to college.

[May 1970] was interesting -- Kent State -- they closed the Millikan campus and the chair of the department called all the first-year grad students, so we were just finishing our first year. He says "gentlemen," and I think there was one woman in the room, he said "the great feast is over. I'm getting these [application rejection] letters." For the first time he could remember, people weren't getting jobs and he said "listen, you all only put a year in. I cannot encourage you to go on, but if you'd like to that's good. But be prepared."

I took the law boards test without even opening the book and got on the waiting list at UNC. Lynne was working and fortunately was able to transfer her job there in Social Security. Each year I liked it a little better and became a graduate assistant.

It was an exciting period to be a young historian. History from the bottom up was coming. There was a guy there named Don Matthews; he had actually been one of Ray Arsenault's professors at Princeton and he was there. He was strange. He had an expensive French Wolf Hound that he would only speak French to. He was the first to really get into the new social history, they were calling it. I read that a little bit and that really attracted me. Howard Zinn came to campus. There was also really good literature on slavery [being published] every year. There was a guy there named Hugh Lefflen who was mister North Carolina, he was probably seventy-five. A bunch of us were studying for [exams] that they really took that seriously in those days, your written and oral [exams].

He was saying that when he graduated from Harvard I think he said in 1915, this would have been fifty-five years later, he could truthfully say he had read every important book in American history. You could actually do that. By the time I was graduating I'm not sure you could do that in some subfields like slavery [with] the sheer volume of material coming out.

One of my great regrets is the year I left Jackie Hall came; she was kind of High Priestess of oral history, particularly civil rights. One of the guys in my class stayed. He became director of history of Smithsonian, and he got a job as director of the North Carolina Humanities Council and then Smithsonian, Greg Glass. Eventually, I think everyone got jobs, a few people decided not to stay in the profession.

In 1974 I was ABD (all but dissertation). I decided to write my dissertation on Italians in St. Louis. Again, looking back, not a rational decision. I've

been very lucky these kind of gut decisions have worked out. I think I read an article in *Time* magazine about this place that I had never been to. It was twenty miles from my house, one of most famous Italian communities [in the country.] We just didn't get around much. I hardly knew St. Louis other than the ballpark and downtown. I finally got to see the place. It was the summer of '73. I got a fellowship at Newberry Library; it was on the new family history.

I was going to spend the rest of the summer, about three months, on the Hill. Lynne and I moved there. I'll never forget the first time I drove up to the Hill. It was an early morning probably June, July 1973, and [I saw] this big guy, I mean a huge guy of a t-shirt. I found out later he was kind of a vigilante squad. The Hill was surrounded by some bad neighborhoods. I said, "Excuse me, is this Dago Hill?" He walks over and said, "Son, you better be Italian." All the locals called it Dago Hill.

The St. Louis Historical Society had this incredible archives in the Public Library downtown. They have one downtown and they had one at the Missouri Historical Society in Forest Park. I go there and I write my name. [The clerk] said, "We have a tradition here. You need to go say hello to get a blessing from this little lady" who's camped in a blanket, about 85 years old, she was one of the survivors of the Titanic. I introduce myself and she asked "What are you studying?" I said, "Italians in St. Louis." She said "why would you want to study that?" The archives had nothing, I mean when I say nothing. They had a couple articles from Italians in the early century, but this was a very elitist organization interested in French fur trappers and the first fathers of St. Louis. [After a half a day at the archive,] I'm thinking I've got a lease for three more months in my apartment in St. Louis, what they hell am I going to do? This is where I developed my avocation of reading newspapers, I had piles and piles of note cards. I'm thinking I'm going to return and say, "I made a mistake, I need a better topic." But I still have three months and I wonder, "Why don't you talk to the people in the neighborhood?"

So I bought a cheap tape recorder and anyone who looked like over 60 years old, I must have done a hundred interviews that summer, some of the most remarkable interviews I've ever done. There's one lady because she must have been close to 90, she said sure, I'll bring some friends you could talk to as well. There were three or four women, each about 90 years old, they were telling me about an event that took place about 1900--this is 1973 now.

She said they lived in the small community in Lombardy called Cuggino, and there's a knock at the door. There's a woman there they don't know and the mother tells them to go to their room and the woman is basically proposing that her son marry this woman's daughter, but they had never met. She's kind of a marriage broker and she said "My-a son is a bigga shot in America, he works for the railroad in Saint-a Louis. I think it would be nice if you're going to marry my son in America." They would bargain, what do you have to bring to this marriage? Well, we have a mule and some linens, a mulberry tree. Then they called the daughter out, "great news, you're going to be married next month in St. Louis and they showed her a picture of her fiancé in a store-bought suit and gold tooth.

All four women were called picture brides because they had only seen pictures

of their future because all the young men like my grandfather Sharon went there to work. If you went back, you'd lose two or three months of your life to expend a lot of money. Everyone trusts their mother, right? They all went with a chaperone on a ship to New York, railroad to St. Louis; at the train station they met their fiancées and were married the next morning. And divorce is unheard of in these days because you're not marrying for love. You're marrying for survival. I mean if you're a young woman in Italy at this time, all the young men are married. If you don't marry an Americano, is what they call them, you entered the convent. If you were the youngest daughter you were the old maid, you took care of the older relatives.

I talked to some mobsters. It was just amazing and really totally unmethodological. I've read a lot of the books about oral history and they really bore me. What I want out of it is some good stories that will make a more colorful book. I'm not interested in the academic nature of oral history, and yes I understand they may not be telling the truth but I can check this out. To me it was also getting to know the community.

The finished book is called "Immigrants on the Hill: Italians in St. Louis." The circle comes around when I met George Tyndall. I met [him] at the Conference of Southern Historians. I think I had been at USF for a few months and I said I'm looking for a publisher. He said I know very good friend at the University of Illinois Press, a big-time press, and that's how it happened. I got the book published at University of Illinois and it came out in 1986.

The Hill was so different than Ybor City. Religion was the cornerstone. In fact, it's interesting there was a priest, I think he was in the article that got me interested in the Hill. His name was Salvatore Polizzi. He was called the guerrilla priest. In 1973, he was one of the hundred most influential young Americans you know under age thirty. He had been born in St. Louis and it seemed like everyone on the Hill wanted their daughter to be a nun.

There was no reason for the Hill to still be standing. Most communities like the Hill had been bulldozed over. The housing was not superior, it was kind of in a not-great area of St. Louis surrounded by some [worse] areas. But it was a community, and that's the other thing that I really honed, was that is a community everyone seemed to want.

The government wanted to build an interstate highway through the community and they did but [Polizzi and the church] got them to put in an overpass. That galvanized the community in the early seventies, and [Polizzi] created this organization called Hill 2000. He said, "I want everyone in the community to agree that if you sell your house, you will sell it to the Hill 2000 nonprofit. We promise you will get top dollar, you can even work with us. We want to ensure that the new families are the right fit and that doesn't simply mean white. We'd like to get Italians, but we want people committed. Are you willing to coach soccer? Are you willing to do Meals on Wheels? There was a place called Rosa's bocce court at a tavern with an arbor of grapes growing over it.

Polizzi more than anyone else saved the community. From the first time we met I got off on the wrong foot. I think he saw me as an interloper, that he knew a lot more about this; he was suspicious, and I could never get him on my side. I said

wonderful things about him and ironically the book wins this prize from the American Catholic Historical Society.

The book is about to be published and the guy from the University of Illinois press, since I'd also interviewed Yogi Berra and Joe Garagiola, there's a chapter on sports in there. Garagiola liked it so much he was telling me, I'm getting you on the Today Show. Unbeknownst to anyone he sends it to Polizzi; then I get a call from the publisher, he's saying, "bad news. The priest demands that you delete a chapter in the book." There's a chapter called "A Still On the Hill" about prohibition. Everyone I interviewed was eager to talk about prohibition. It seemed like there must have been a bootleg still in everyone's basement but it did not lead to dysfunction and crime, it led to upward mobility.

Your first home would be the basement. My uncle had a place like that, it was just a basement with a flat roof about three feet above the ground. If you had money later you build a floor on top of that. Seemingly, they weren't even drinking the stuff. They had their Chianti and things, but it was a kind of positive aspect of the community. There's no way I'm going to delete the chapter and so he said, well good luck when you return to the Hill.

I haven't seen him since but I gave a talk about two years ago on the Hill. This group invited me back and many of the children of the people I interviewed were there. Someone comes up and said Father Polizzi would like to talk. Here's his phone number. I feel terrible I never called him. I still have it. If I learned a lesson there, you probably need to be a part of the community. I lived there and everything but it was a means toward an end.

I'm teaching and about this time Milliken calls UNC and the guy there I knew said, "Someone's on sabbatical, would you like to come for one year?" Lynne's from Decatur Illinois. It's two hours from St. Louis. So I did that and the guy came back. During [giving] my first final examination, this would be in December 1974, Nixon's resigned, is kind of interesting time. I tell the class "I've got great news, my wife is pregnant" and she had just found out. Afterwards three coeds come up and they said haven't you read [The Population Bomb]. They were indignant, how can you bring up a child in this world?

So June came, the job's over, Lynne delivers in July, so I spend a year babysitting Amy and finishing the dissertation. I had no car, there was nowhere to go even if I wanted to take the stroller. I had a radio. I taught my first and third years [as a post-graduate student]. I don't think there was ever any optimism on my side that this was going to be permanent. The first salary I made was nine thousand a year in 1974 and in 1976 I made twelve thousand. I even applied for a policeman's job there.

I was about to take my physical exam and I had been to a conference in Atlanta where I met the guy and I interviewed at the University of South Florida. They wanted someone in immigration. John Behlolovak was on the committee and they asked me to come back to campus. I came back in May of 1977, I got the job offer. Luckily, we sold our house easily enough. In those days we were in the quarter system and classes didn't begin till late September. The reason I know it was August, Elvis had died. In transit, I was in Chattanooga [where the] waitress was in tears and she said, "Honey, the king has died."

We bought a place in Temple Terrace and I badly needed a haircut. On 56th Street, [I found the] newly-opened Temple Terrace Barber College. There are three students, pimply seventeen year-olds and about a 65 or 70- year-old guy with a Van Dyke beard and the guy says "you choose." The old guy is a humming a little Italian opera as he's cutting my hair. At the end I said, "Please don't think I'm being nosy, but why would you at your age think about barber college?" He said, "I just retired from 40 years of teaching at the University of Tampa and my pension is so bad I need extra income." I'm about to start my career. I wrote this up years later I think it was my 30th year in Tampa. I wrote it in Leland Hawes's column but I never got the guy's name. Three of the students wrote me and said "you've answered our question. We were walking by Wolf Brothers, a downtown men's store, and we noticed that our former music professor was cutting hair."

I had never heard of Ybor City. Even at UNC which specializes in southern history, I can't ever recall Florida being mentioned. A blank-slate would be too kind. Most of the research on the Hill book was finished and I think my first day in Tampa I went to see Tony Pizzo. I swear it was the first or second day. He couldn't have been nicer and looking back at it I'm a very lucky guy. Things fell in place. It is also the un-Hill. On the Hill religion was the cornerstone; here it was almost an annoying institution. [On the Hill,] there was no labor movement and there was also no documents. [In Ybor,] you had documents.

At the time very few people had studied Ybor. There was this guy named Duward Long. I have always been curious why he didn't do a book. He was a very good historian. I'm not sure there was anything else in English. A woman named Gloria Jahoda did a couple books at that time [in which] Ybor is casually mentioned. I probably would not have studied Ybor had it not been for one of my UNC buddies George Pozetta.

Both George Pozetta and David Coburn arrived a year before me. Both of them had been Marine captains in Vietnam. How many Vietnam vet professors do you know? I bet you can name them on one hand. These guys were smart; they were both married, had kids, they had Master's degrees. Clearly they were [advancing quickly], ready to move on with their lives, and they're also very disciplined.

George was studying New York Italians at UNC, an unlikely place for both of us to be studying Italian immigrants. North Carolina may have had the fewest number of Italian immigrants in America, but we were there and then George and I became very close friends. He got a job at the University of Florida. Mike Gannon hired him in '71-'72. George was a year into doing a history of Italians in Ybor City. George did not have to say, "Let's do this together." I think George realized we were a really good team: a classic co-authorship. I was a better stylist than George, George was a better analyst. He liked to look at you know the where this fits in the big picture. I never really liked that and he knew I had the ability to interview these people, I was here. It made a formidable team. Back to back books.

It's also a miracle were even having this conversation. It was a very tense time in the history department and again I blame some of it on myself. It was an immensely talented department; that was one of the

problems. There was so much talent and so little money and I didn't subscribe to some of the politics of the time. When I came up for tenure the first time I had contracts with the Hill book and it was "in press." They definitely sent a message to me; they turned me down. I got a zero for research. Technically it wasn't turning me down, it was allowing me one more chance. In hindsight, I could have very easily been let go. It was not a happy place.

In 1980, I got a one-year Fulbright fellowship to Sicily teaching. George was also going to be in Italy at that time in Florence. Lou Perez, one of the most talented people I ever knew, probably the best stylist. I don't know anyone who writes more and better. Lou said, "You're out of your mind taking the Fulbright because you need to get your book out [to earn tenure]." I was defiant, I'm going to go. Consequently, I got not a dime from the University [for Sicily]. From the research and language point of view, it was worth it. It's always been one of the highlights of my life and I was able to get invaluable research both on the Hill book and Tampa with the archives there.

It also changed my path. I remember when I was in [Sicily] in '81, I would go in every week to the American Embassy library in Rome. It was a tumultuous year in Florida. I'd go in and read *The International Herald Tribune* and Florida is in flames, you had the race riots in Miami, the Haitian boatpeople, Mariel and I'm thinking when I get these two books done I think I'm going to make a transition to Florida. It seemed to me that at that time there weren't many people studying Florida and this is going to become a pretty important state. I realized only at that time that the greatest story in my lifetime maybe was happening in Florida every day. I'll have tenure, so if I write a book I'm not gonna write an academic book, I'm going to write a popular book. So that was a very critical time.

George and I went down there [Santo Stefano, Sicily]; we arrived St. Joseph's Day. Tony Pizzo gave us the name of the school principal. He took both of us, took our arms and we walked down the Main Street. He would just kind of nod to people and saying "the Americans have arrived." The Italian anti-defamation league is organizing and it's this period they call the ethnic revival. The buttons, "Kiss me, I'm Italian!"

[I tried and failed to interview Santo Trafficante.] I did interview Danny Alvarez [in] Seminole Heights where Danny Alvarez is; poor guy just lost one his legs to diabetes, but his story is worthy of a screenplay. He's a young kid during the Spanish Civil War his father is obviously very supportive of the Republican side and then Franco triumphed. The father comes home gives his sons hugs which he thought was strange. He goes back, shoots his boss who's a Franco sympathizer, and then kills himself. His poor kid is essentially an orphan and he gets a job at a Seminole Heights drug store run by Curtis Hixon, who becomes a city councilman, and Alvarez may be the first Latin policeman there. Hixon brings him on as his bag man and he's telling me about making these pickups during elections. He'd say "I'd get a hundred, two hundred." I said "dollars?" He said, "No, hundreds of thousands." He'd take money to Tallahassee.

I interviewed [Tampa Mayor] Nick Nuccio three times; he would always dress up. The poor man if he ever had money he took illegally, he was hiding it, because he

would wear a suit that had holes that moths had eaten. I'd go down to Ybor City twice a week, often to the Italian Club, Cuban Club, and there would always be people there and those having coffee. I don't think anyone ever turned me down. The only one who turned me down was the crazy man at El Pasaje, Jose [Luis] Avellanal.

USF did not have an oral history program at that time. UF gave me the tapes and I don't think they transcribed all of them; eventually I think USF transcribed the rest. The other thing that cannot be underestimated is {USF Tampa] Special Collections. I don't know if [director] J. Dobkin had any great interest in Ybor but was willing to support [relevant collections] and probably change the direction of the Special Collections. The Pizzo and Hampton Dunn collections were huge [acquisitions]. Glenn Westfall should be given credit for bringing in the cigar label collections, Osterweil. Looking back at it the real story is just the synergy between the history department and Special Collections.

When we all arrived this was a very understudied city. It wasn't the most harmonious group. You had Nancy Hewitt, Lou Perez, Robert Snyder in American Studies, Jack Moore, Glenn Westfall, Bob Kerstein. Bob and I arrived the same year. Bob was in St. Louis when I was in St. Louis [but] we didn't know one another.

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