

EI-165

SALVATORE FICHERA

BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 21, 1891

INTERVIEW DATE: 6/3/1992

RUNNING TIME: 1:22:02

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: LORD CHAMBERLAIN HOME
STRATFORD, CT.**

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 6/1993

SICILY, 1908

AGE 16

PORT: NAPLES

RESIDENCES:

- **ROCHELLE VALDEMONE**
- **THE US: BRIDGEPORT, CT**

Oral Historian's Note: Mr. Fichera turned seventeen in 1908 after he arrived in America. This interview was conducted in a nursing home and the recording is filled with the extraneous noise one would expect in such a place. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 2/2/1993.

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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today in Stratford, Connecticut with Mr. Salvatore Fichera, who came from Italy, from Sicily in 1908 when he was seventeen years old. Today is June 3, 1992 and it's in the afternoon. I'm very happy to be here, and I'll start by asking you your birth date. What's your birth date?

FICHERA: December 21st, 1891, six o'clock in the morning. My mother told me about it. Six o'clock in the morning.

LEVINE: And what town were you born in?

FICHERA: Rochella Valdemone, Province of Messina. (to his son) You explain to them.

MR. FISCHERA'S SON: I can't say anything.

LEVINE: Okay. When we finish, your son can spell the names of things. Okay. So tell me about that town where you were born, where you grew up.

FICHERA: Rochella Valdemone.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was it like there? What was it like? What did it look like?

FICHERA: A very small city. A very small city, and I was born over there and I work over there. I learned my trade over there.

LEVINE: Well, tell me first who was in your family?

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FICHERA: My family? I had my mother, my father, my brother, he was a lieutenant in the police, my brother. Another brother, Tom, he was here. I did bring him over here. Another brother was a blacksmith and he went to Argentina and he visited me over there.

LEVINE: Now, did you have any sisters?

FICHERA: Yes, three, four sisters. One passed away, she was young. I had three sisters.

LEVINE: What are your sisters' names?

FICHERA: Giuseppa Maria, two names, Giuseppa Maria, Angela, and Rosa.

LEVINE: And your brothers? What were their names?

FICHERA: My brother, I told you, the lieutenant, Giuseppe Antonio and Gaetano. You understand, eh? You talk Italian?

LEVINE: No, no. (she laughs) And your mother's name?

FICHERA: Nicolina.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name?

FICHERA: Spitoletti.

LEVINE: Spitoletti?

FICHERA: Spitoletti, before she got married.

LEVINE: And your father, what was his first name?

FICHERA: Antonio, forget it, Antonio Figetti, you know Fichera.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't you tell me about your family. Tell me about your family. What was your mother like?

FICHERA: She was about your size. She was a very wonderful woman, and thank God a very good mother. She married when she was sixteen years old and my father was thirty. And she passed away, she was very young, forty-six years, that's all. Yes, it's a shame.

LEVINE: Did she come here to the United States?

FICHERA: No, no, no. My father and mother never come here. Only my brother and my two sisters, they come here. My brother-in-law, you know, all his family.

LEVINE: Did you go to school when you were . . .

FICHERA: In Italy? Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Tell me about what was school like. What do you remember when you would think about school?

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FICHERA: From the school, I went to the Quinta General, no Quinta General, sorry. Quinta Elementary School. Quinta, you know.

LEVINE: Quinta Elementary School?

FICHERA: Oh, sure. I went in the school. It was very nice. And then . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember being in school?

FICHERA: Oh, sure. Just like now, yeah. Matter of fact . . .

LEVINE: What about your father?

FICHERA: My father went to school over there, too, that's years ago, you know. Yes, and my brother Tom, Gaetano, he was in the United States.

LEVINE: Well, before you tell me about the United States, tell me, what did your father do for work?

FICHERA: My father, he had a bakery shop. He made spaghetti and bread, groceries.

LEVINE: And did you work in that shop?

FICHERA: I help him a lot. Oh, yeah. I used to remember how they made the spaghetti.

LEVINE: What was your father like? What kind of a man was your father?

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FICHERA: Tall and skinny, a healthy man. A very healthy man, very hard-working man.

LEVINE: Was he strict? Was he strict with you?

FICHERA: Oh, yeah. You had to be good. Oh, he was very. My mother was more strict than him. My mother, she beat me up.

LEVINE: She beat you up?

FICHERA: Oh, sure. I was a small kid, you know. Do something wrong, she beat me up. She cried after. So my father was very nice, the support. He send all the son to school. Not to college, you know, but to the fifth, the Quinta Elementary. You know what it means, Quinta?

LEVINE: Yes.

FICHERA: And everybody send their kids to school. And my brother was a barber. He can't make no living as barber, you know, small city. He said, "What I'm going to do here?" Big fellow, though. Oh, he was wonderful. And he joined in the police department.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the bakery. What do you remember about the bakery?

FICHERA: Bakery? Well, I remember when we mixed the dough, by hand, you know. No big machine. Big tank, put the flour there, water. Then everyone takes a big stick. Uh-uh, uh-uh (imitates noise), they make the dough. And after they had the machine with the plats, you know, the plat, all kind of

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spaghetti. Like plats, it was really some of them came wonderful, and I think it would be (?). And they started to roll and spaghetti come around. I obey my father. I was a boy, I helped put them in the can. You know, canned. (speaks in Italian) Stick, stick. Turned it up, and sit on it. He said, "This spaghetti got to be dry." And a lot of people, they go, they got the wheat, they had it ground and make a flour. They bring it to my father, he said, "I'll make spaghetti out of it, but you've got to pay for it." (he laughs) That's how he used to make a living. A nice living, you know. But no rich people, though. No, no.

LEVINE: What did you do for fun when you were in your little town?

FICHERA: For fun we used to run, the kids, and hide ourselves at nighttime. No lights! We run, so everybody was, we find him, so he was, you've got to find me now. I was (he speaks Italian) he'll find me.

LEVINE: It's like hide-and-seek? Is that like the hide-and-seek game? The game where you hide and somebody finds you?

FICHERA: Yeah, yeah. It's a game like that. (?) And we played the, what do you call that game? I can't think of it. (he pauses) Gee, even I forget in Italian.

LEVINE: Tell me about the house you lived in? What did the house you lived in look like?

FICHERA: My house? We had, you know, no big home, beautiful home, kitchen, bedrooms, dining room, you know. Not too big a house. So we did, be all right. Yeah, my house was very nice.

LEVINE: Did you have a garden? Did you grow things?

FICHERA: No, no. No garden. I had my uncle, my mother's brother is a priest. Very nice man, a rich man. But he didn't make it from the church. No, he used the grandpa, the great-grandpa, he was a lot of fun. They make wine, a big place. We used to go over there for one month. He had a beautiful home out in the country, you know, beautiful. And he used to have ladies pick up the grapes, fill up the basket, put on their head. (he laughs) And all go home, you know, little things. And dump it on the press, and the machine grind the grapes. No, no machine. Man. Take your shoes off. Boom, boom, boom. (imitates noise) And they grind the grapes. And you ought to see the wine, (he whistles) in a big tank, of course. And after they put them in the barrel, they bring in the city. And my uncle, he had downstairs about five hundred gallons of barrels. More wine down the cellar, fill up with our tank, the barrel, you know. The barrel got to be very good wood, (?). But he had everything. And when the wine was all ready, people from out of town with the mule and the barrel on the side, had come around to buy the wine from him. Go over there, follow down, "We want to buy some wine." All right. Went over there. Open the thing from the bottom. The smell, strong. Always they argue with the price. They know. (he laughs) They don't want to pay the wrong price. All right. He was nice, a rich man.

LEVINE: What was your uncle's name?

FICHERA: Antonio. Nino, Anthony. My son is that. Anthony. A very nice man.

LEVINE: Did you have other relatives around where you lived?

FICHERA: Oh, sure. I got a lot of relative, from my father's brothers, more than one. My mother, she's got a godfather, a priest, another man. Oh, I had a big family.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents? Did you have a grandmother and a grandfather?

FICHERA: Oh, I remember my grandpa.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

LEVINE: Giuseppe, grandpa. Of course, his wife passed away, you know, and he was living right next door to my house with a balcony. It used to become. And my father was very good to his father, because he was a barber and doctor. You don't believe, huh? (Dr. Levine laughs) He was a barber, and he knows so many things about doctor. Many people got sick, they don't call the real doctor, they call . . .

LEVINE: Your uncle, your grandpa.

FICHERA: Giuseppe, my grandpa. It's really something else.

LEVINE: What did your grandpa do when he was acting like a doctor?

FICHERA: Barber.

LEVINE: When he was being a doctor, when he would help people to get well?

FICHERA: He never go to school to be a doctor.

LEVINE: No, but what would he do?

FICHERA: He was a barber.

LEVINE: Yeah. Would he use herbs, or how did he treat people?

FICHERA: He mixed up some kind of medicine himself. They go on the farm, they pick up some grass, boil. It was not medicine. (he laughs) And he give it to the people. It was all right.

LEVINE: And people thought that he . . .

FICHERA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Matter of fact, after he died, his son was a barber, and he was a doctor, too. But the real doctor send him to jail.

LEVINE: They sent him . . .

FICHERA: In a jail.

LEVINE: In jail?

FICHERA: Oh, sure. Because, you know, he ain't got no license to be doctor. He's not a doctor, and they send him quite a few times to jail. (he laughs) That's a good story, eh?

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LEVINE: Yeah. Now, what else do you remember, when you think about when you lived there, what are the things you remember from being a little boy growing up.

FICHERA: When I was a little boy? Well, a little boy, I tell you, go to school, and after they sent me to learn a trade.

LEVINE: And what was your trade?

FICHERA: Shoemaker. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: And what did, when you were sent to learn you trade, where did you go? What did you do?

FICHERA: They send me before, I was on the sea, but after to be a really good one, they send you to the big city, Catania. Did you ever hear of Catania? Sicily. A big city. There's wonderful shoemakers over there. They send them over there. Don't get nothing, no pay, just teach you the trade.

LEVINE: How long do you stay there?

FICHERA: Oh, I was a couple of years. And after I learn my trade, then I come back in my city. When I come back in my city, my God, I said, "What I'm going to do now?" A small city. Jesus, I study shoemaker, I'm making a lot because you used to make bowls, you know. But it happened, my brother Tom, he was in this country, and he come back to see my old man. An old man, you know. And he saw me, seventeen years. My God, he don't believe. And he told me, "Now, what do you do?" He don't know I was a

shoemaker. And he was a shoemaker, too. Yeah.

LEVINE: When did he go to the United States? When did Tom go to the United States?

FICHERA: To the United States? To New York.

LEVINE: When? How old was he?

FICHERA: Oh, he was a young man. I don't remember his age, but he was a younger man.

LEVINE: He was younger than you or older than you?

FICHERA: Older than me. So he said, "Now he come in Italy, Rochella, like I said before, he's such an old man, you know." Now, he said, I have to come back to the United States. I said, "Best country in the world. That's the best one in the world." So then he said to me, "Hey, Sal," he said, "you going to come to the United States?" By God, I said, "Very good." "All right." And right away they prepare the passport and everything, and then we come into the United States. And we got the boat, a big boat.

LEVINE: Okay. How did you pay for your trip?

FICHERA: How did I pay? My father, my mother, she was very sick. She had too many children. My father, that cost three hundred lires, you know, lires. I didn't have it. To tell you the truth, I'm supporting my mother, I support the kids in the school who were learning the trade. I didn't have three hundred

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lire. But three hundred lire at the time, that was just like three hundred thousand, not three hundred, three thousand dollars. So we went to the doctor from the city, he loaned money. He was a doctor and loaned money, too. Well, we went over there, and the doctor say, "My son, you want to go to the United States?" I said, "Would you loan me three hundred lires?" He said, "What are you going to give me for collateral, for security?" I said, "I'll . . ." And I give it to for security a beautiful piece of property near the city. Ah, it was that beautiful. Really, ten, about ten minutes away from the city. We used to go there, pick up fruit, grapes, figs, apples, oranges. Beautiful. So I said, "I'll give you that piece of property for guarantee." "All right." So he give me three hundred lire, and the money, I come to get it with my brother Tom. We took the boat.

LEVINE: What boat did you take?

FICHERA: The Taormina. A big boat, the Taormina. We got the boat . . .

LEVINE: How did you get to the boat? How did you get to the boat?

FICHERA: How? From Messina.

LEVINE: How did you go? To Naples, did you go?

FICHERA: To Naples.

LEVINE: How did you get to Naples?

FICHERA: With the train. With the train we went to Naples. From Messina we take a

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boat to go to Naples. I drove, get off over there from a bigger boat.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you left home? Do you remember leaving home?

FICHERA: No, I don't remember. It was an apple, I know that.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you took with you?

FICHERA: What I took with me? A nice suitcase, my clothes, clean, very nice, everything's clean. My brother had his suitcase, too, and we had a trunk.

LEVINE: What was in the trunk?

FICHERA: The trunk there was a lot of clothes. So when we get that boat, we went third class. There was first, second. I could not afford to go second class. On third class. My God. (whistles) Way down. It was nice, all right.

LEVINE: What was it like down there? What was it like down in the bottom of the ship?

FICHERA: Oh, it was clean, it was very clean. But crowded, you know, no air. The window, you see the water on the storm. (he makes storm noises) The windows were closed, but you could see it banging on the other window. Oh! So we get on the boat. Take fifteen days from Naples to New York. Fifteen days!

LEVINE: Was it a hard trip? Was the weather . . .

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FICHERA: The weather was good, but three days before we reached New York there was an earthquake. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Earthquake?

FICHERA: Earthquake, yeah. And water, my God. There was such an earthquake, the water, the boat went down. It's true. But they come back so fast they bring the boat up. And you were sick. The noise, the dishes, the pain. Boom, boom, boom. My God. So three days before coming here was hard. There was big damage on the boat, but we got in here straight all right, but it was luck. When we got in here on Thursday . . .

LEVINE: First, did you meet anybody on the boat?

FICHERA: Oh, a lot of people. Friends, you know. No friend, we never see before.

LEVINE: Did you ever see them after?

FICHERA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Who did you see after that you met on the boat?

FICHERA: Oh, a fellow, some people, but I couldn't think of it no more, so many years, Mendanez? Oh, Mendanez, he was my landsman, yeah. He was on the same boat.

LEVINE: And did he come here to Bridgeport?

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FICHERA: No, he went to Danbury.

LEVINE: Danbury. And you kept a friendship with him?

FICHERA: Oh, yes. A very good friendship. When we took the same train in New York, he go to Danbury, and I come to Bridgeport. Two trains. He was a barber, too. He has a brother in Danbury, and he went over there. Now, after he come back, he come to Bridgeport, and his son, he was the mayor of Bridgeport. Can you believe it? He passed away not long ago, young yet. He was the mayor of Bridgeport.

LEVINE: And what was his name? Do you remember his name?

FICHERA: Mendanez. Mendanez, yeah. Mendanez. Now, what I said, we took the boat, went downstairs, eat good, and I like steak. So I go downstairs after my lunch, I could eat anything. I'll eat anything, a loaf of bread. I don't have to slice. (he laughs) So I went downstairs, and I see this steak, so smell, broiler on fire. I go over there. All right. "Give me a steak. How much?" "Thirty cents." Can you believe that? Beautiful steak. All right, I eat. When we had eaten our steak we saw the Statue of Liberty, after the storm. My brother say, "Come here, Sal." I went, I said, "What do you want?" He said to me, "You see that statue over there?" In Italian, of course. I say, "Yeah." "That's the Statue of Liberty. Do you hear? Free!" You could talk, as long as you don't do a thing wrong, they'll put you in jail, but you're free to talk, speech. Wonderful, that's the Statue of Liberty. I was so gladly see. When we got to the island, they keep us there forty-eight hours. Big exam. And here, oh, it was a lot of people they came from from, I don't want to mention. (he whispers) The louse in their hair.

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Forty-eight hours, they keep us. Look in the hair, look if I was clean. A lot of people, they won't let them get in because they got a lot of louse in the hair. They keep over there longer, maybe they come, they let them get in the United States. Yeah. So my brother says, "That's the United States Statue of Liberty, and you come, you're free. Your speech, everything." And thank God I'm so happy I'm in the United States.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about where did you sleep? Where did you sleep when you were? Did you sleep at Ellis Island? Did you sleep at Ellis Island? Did you go to sleep there? What was that like? Do you remember it?

FICHERA: Oh, it was a big room.

LEVINE: With bunk beds, or with cots? What kind of beds?

FICHERA: Oh, cots. Temporary.

LEVINE: And food? Did you eat at Ellis Island?

FICHERA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

FICHERA: We come down, they bring the sandwich, not a sandwich, a big. And they bring a banana, you know, bananas. I never see a banana in my life. (he laughs) I say, "What's this?" And I start eating without taking the skin off. My brother, because he was here, he says, "What are you doing?" I said, "I don't know what's this I eat." He say, "Oh, no, no." He says, "You've got

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to take the skin off." (he laughs) That's the truth. Believe me, that's the truth. So he show me, he take the skin off. "Now," he said, "you can eat." So we take a train to Bridgeport.

LEVINE: Did you have an eye examination too?

FICHERA: Ooh, eye exam. Eyes, throat, chest, everything. Oh, yes. Big examination.

LEVINE: Were you treated nicely?

FICHERA: Very nice. Oh, they treat us very nice, very nice, yeah. And then we took a train, we come to Bridgeport at nighttime. You know something about Bridgeport? No. And we get off the train, 12 o'clock at night, wrong station, and you got to walk to get home. My sister and brother-in-law, his family, they had a home. And when we got on the corner, Main and Fairfield Avenue. You don't know anyhow. Very, very dangerous corner. Traffic, my God, cars coming in and out. Trolley car. You don't remember the trolley car. Trolley car. And he stopped over there, he says, "Sal, when you come on this corner," he stopped me, he say, "be very careful before you go across the street. Otherwise, they're going to kill you." I remember just like now. Yeah. But thank God, I arrived all right, yeah.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE B, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Do you remember what struck you as different when you first came to Bridgeport? What was different here in the United States? What was different from what you were used to in Italy?

FICHERA: There was a lot different. Beautiful, everything's fine. Have a nice breakfast, nice dinner, nice lunch. Didn't eat that much in Italy. I don't be ashamed to say that. We had enough. We had a grocery, my father had a grocery. A lot of people, they had not that much. So I come here, beautiful. My two sisters, my nephews, small. My God, they come out such a beautiful dinner.

LEVINE: Do you remember what the dinner was? What your first dinner here was?

FICHERA: Roast beef, everything the best. Roast beef, oh, it was wonderful. So, and after he told me watch out this corner, I had my trade and I got a job, shoemaker.

LEVINE: In Bridgeport.

FICHERA: In Bridgeport. Three dollars a week. From seven o'clock in the morning to nine o'clock in the morning, every night. Three dollars a week. Now, my sister Rosa, she was a singer here. I'll never forget. That three dollars, she take it away from me. You want to know why? She said, "You got to save, you got to pay the trip. You don't want the doctor in Italy to take the beautiful property we got." She take the three dollars away and pay for the trip and send the money to Italy. And we got the property back. So after I started work, three dollars a week and board, you know, board. Three

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dollars a week and board.

LEVINE: Oh, and board. Uh-huh.

FICHERA: Yeah. And board. It was about two dollars a week. But you ought to see what they give you. Chicken, beautiful. I said, "Look at the difference between Italy and here." Since then I started work, work. And after I went back in Italy to see my father, they took me in the army.

LEVINE: What year was that? Do you remember when?

FICHERA: Oh, yeah. 1913.

LEVINE: 1913 you went back to Italy. And your father was in the army.

FICHERA: I took him in the army.

LEVINE: And what about you?

FICHERA: They took me in the army.

LEVINE: They took you, too?

FICHERA: No. They took me in the army. I went to Italy to see my old man, my father, and I asked my lawyer here in Bridgeport, I said, "Look here," I said, "I want to go see my father in Italy and I didn't go in the army. So you think they're going to take me?" "Oh, no. That's stupid. Oh, no." I left my business here. "Oh, no, no," he said, "you can go over there. They won't

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take you in the army any more." "All right." When I got over there they come around, they say, "You got to go in the army." I said, "Oh, yeah." They took me in the army in Venezia. I left my business here. When I come back here, after I got a discharge . . .

LEVINE: So you went to Venezia? You went into the army there?

FICHERA: That's right.

LEVINE: And what was it like in the army? What do you remember about being in the army?

FICHERA: I'll tell you the truth. That's the truth. Go in the army, they make a man out of you. You know, you're a boy, a lot of stupid thing. But over there, such a discipline. Oh, what a discipline in the army. So, all right.

LEVINE: Did you like it?

FICHERA: Listen, I wasn't thinking, oh, like or not you've got to stay, because I didn't like much. Oh, no. Hmm. When I got in the army, I go to Venezia.

LEVINE: For one year?

FICHERA: One year. I went, come for lunch, they bring you the lunch. Loaf of bread. I was so used to United States, the food. I don't want. Oh, the rest of the soldiers, by God. All right. And my bread, a lot of people say, "Hey, give it to me, give it to me." Now I say, "Who catch?" I throw it in the air, and someone, I don't know, they catch. But I, after that, money started getting

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short, I didn't have enough money no more to eat in restaurants. I started eating my lunch, my supper, just like the rest. And then, believe me, then it was enough. That's the way it goes.

LEVINE: So how did you get out of the army?

FICHERA: How you get out? Why, when I get finished my term.

LEVINE: One year?

FICHERA: One year, yeah. One year. Because my company, my regiment that was in the armory, discharging, discharging me, too. One year.

LEVINE: So then what? When you got discharged from the army, then what did you do?

FICHERA: What? When I got discharged from the army? I went to Rochella, and my brother come from the United States like I tell you before, and he say, "You go, I'm taking you with me to the United States." That's when he come with the Taormina, the big ship. I told you about the storm we had. After I get in the United States I thank God, I'm so happy.

LEVINE: Now, in 1913 you came, then you came back again?

FICHERA: 1913, yeah, vacation.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, you came, you left your shoemaking business, right? Then you went back . . .

FICHERA: To Italy?

LEVINE: To Italy. Then you went back to the United States again.

FICHERA: I went to Italy just for a vacation, not for stay.

LEVINE: Okay. And then did you go back again?

FICHERA: For vacation, yes. Not for stay. Just a vacation. Yeah, so I started to go, I went back.

LEVINE: So in 1914, after you were in the army, then you came back to the United States. Did you come back to Bridgeport?

FICHERA: Bridgeport. That's right, yeah.

LEVINE: And then what happened? Were you married by then?

FICHERA: No, no. But Bridgeport, I started work again. But after, my brother-in-law, he had a shoemaking shop. Nice place, you know. And I bought it from him. Three hundred dollars.

LEVINE: First you worked for him? Did you work in the shop?

FICHERA: Yes.

LEVINE: And then you bought the shop.

FICHERA: Yeah. And he went back to Italy, the stupid. That's true. And I bought the shop from him.

LEVINE: For three hundred dollars.

FICHERA: For three hundred dollars. That was a lot of money then. I bought the shop, I started work. I know the trade. My brother Tom, he was very good on the orthopedic shoes for the crippled people, and they used to make, work together, you know, used to make shoes, repair, and a good living, an honest living. So we had everything the best. And always I say God Bless America.

LEVINE: When you were working and you had your own shop and you were charging people to fix their shoes, how much did you charge people to fix?

FICHERA: What was it? Ten cents, ladies lift. Ten cents. You believe that now? Ten cents. The shoemaking shop, old men bring shoes, and we used to ask, "You want it sewed down or nailed down?" You understand what I mean? Somebody says, "Sew down, how much?" "One dollar." "How much nail to it down?" "Seventy-five cents." And we used to put the soles, and put the nails in them out.

LEVINE: Say that again.

FICHERA: Put the nails. When they said, the people, nail them down, put the nails in them out. Bam, bam. (he laughs)

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LEVINE: And did you do everything by hand then?

FICHERA: By hand. No machine. No machine at all. Stitch by hand, before you put the sole in the heels, takes an hour.

LEVINE: It would take an hour?

FICHERA: Sure, sure. You know, stitch by hand, that's a lot. Make the trade, you know, straight. You know what I mean. Put the braces, you know, the (?) braces. You know, the braces. More than a minute. (he makes descriptive noises) And then I, last time I went back I had a beautiful place, a big place. My father was an old man. I said, "By God, I've got to see my father."

LEVINE: Do you remember what year?

FICHERA: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure I remember. This was 1929, yeah. I went to see my father, and I left my business here. I left the manager. I had five people working for me. Oh, yeah, I never was dumb. I said, "This is the United States. Opportunity for everybody! If you don't take it, you're hard luck." So I left my manager, and the manager, the one I left, a young man, he was the same name of mine, Fichera. I never see him. When I hire him, I put him on my book. I say, "What's your name?" "Fichera." I said, "Where do you come from?" Any town where he come from, you know, near the city. Now I said, "Look here, I want to go in Italy because I want to go and see my old man before he pass away." And I said, "I'm going to leave you in charge of the store." "Oh, sure, Mr. Fichera." He said, "You can leave me, everything will be fine." All right I went to Italy. My old man. And my

brother Tom, he wasn't here no more, he was in Italy. He was a sick man. During the war he got a gas, the First World War. He went back in Italy. One time I wanted to see him. He was sick. "Sit down." What was wrong? He said, "I am sick with gas." You know, the First World War, they give you gas, he got it. I said, "I come here to see you, see Daddy, and I'm going to go back to Bridgeport." He says, "That's nice." But he said to me, "Sal, I won't let you back no more. You've got to get married." You want to know the story or not?

LEVINE: Yes.

FICHERA: He say, "You've got to get married." I said, "Tom, what are you talking about? You know my business. How can I get married like that?" "Oh, yeah," he said, "I won't let you go." (he laughs) So I went to Rochella, a small city, beautiful local girls. So my sister, the big sister, she wasn't yet in the United States, she says, "Sal, I'm going to introduce you to a local girl." I said, "Look here, I've got to go back to the United States. And don't get them, because I couldn't marry." "No, no, no." Say, "You've got to get married." So, and she name, she named my wife, her name Maria, Mary, Jamboy. "Oh," I said, "Mary Jamboy?" She say, "Yes." "Her brother is the biggest contractor in New York. They're building Grand Central." You know Grand Central? They built. The biggest contractor. My God. We went to school together in Italy. Oh, so fine. So I said, "How will I know the girl?" I didn't see the girl here. I said, "All right." So my bigger two sisters, they went over there, my mother. Mother, Comara, you know, landsmen. I said, "My brother, they want to come here tonight to bring the best Ricardo from your son, New York." You understand what I told them. It was a lie. (he laughs) You know, excuse. So I went over there, I get in. "Oh, oh,

oh." They know me very well anyhow. "Sit down." And I look, and no girl. She don't know nobody. Now, before you know, she come from her sister, she was living across street, at nighttime. She open the door and get in. Well, because when I saw her, beautiful. (he pauses) I said, "Look at this beautiful, black hair." I went home, they fix us a nice table, wine, nice candy. I had money. Nice table. We eat. And I took a piece of candy, just like in United States we do, and I hand it to the girl. She was almost dropped dead. She said, "Look at this fellow, he got nerve." She told me, she offered me without. I said, "Here, signorina." All right. I went home, and my sister and my brother Tom ask me, says, "You see Maria?" I says, "Sure." "My God," they said, "couldn't be nothing any better." But I says, "I couldn't marry her because I've got to go back to the United States." He says, "Don't mind. Don't worry." So my big sister the next morning, they went for the mother, and ask if I want to marry her daughter. "Oh," she said, "Comara. I don't know if she like him or not. I'll go and ask her. I'll let you know tomorrow." "All right." Her mother come and say, "Maria, you see that young fellow, the man who came here last night." "Oh, yeah." "He wants to marry you." "He want to marry me?" She say, "Yes. What you say, do you like him or not." Believe me, she told me this after, "Ma," she said, "don't lose no time. Tell him I love him." I was young, you know. A lot of hair. I said, "Comara, my daughter like your brother." I've got to get married. And before I got married to bring her here, they told in the government, my God, they won't let go girls without knowing who was our enemy here. That takes time. We've got to write to New Haven, got in the Consul, in Bridgeport. Took them nine months in Italy, nine months my business here. My father and her father talked together. Said, "Look here, Sal," my name, "you don't have to go back to the United States any more. You could stay here. I give you a lot of property." The mother give, my

wife will bring. He says, "You don't have to." Anyhow, he said, "When you go back to the United States, sell whatever you got, my store, I come back here, I could be a rich man here." All right, I say, they ask my wife. We was married already.

LEVINE: You got married there?

FICHERA: Yeah. He said to her, "Maria, your husband, you don't know when he could take you to the United States. And he's going to go back to the United States and when is he going to call you?" You understand what I'm talking. She said to my father and her father, "You two crazy." She said, "You think I'll let go my husband to the United States all alone? Oh, no. No, no. Where he go, I stay here? Oh, no. Where he go, I got to go with him. So they stop me to come." So I worked nine months, and after I got all the information, what kind of man I was in Bridgeport, thank God. Businessman. Never had trouble with the police. Beautiful, nice. And we come here. My manager, ah! A crook. Nine months he didn't save me a penny. Do you believe that? He took everything for himself. He didn't pay the people who give the stuff, and he said to the people from Boston, because he used to buy a lot of stuff, to New York, "How is my brother?" So (?) said, "Take all you want." He didn't pay nobody. So when I come here I had these people coming around, telling, "Mr. Fichera, your brother didn't pay Rosa for the material." A lot of money. My God. And I said to the man, "Fichera, that crook." "So what you did?" "None of your business." It was Harlands, a big department store, was closed for repairs. There was nobody in the street no more. He was a liar. I say to the people, I said, "How much he owe you?" "So much. A lot of money." People from Boston, so much. From New York, so much. I said, "Look

here, you know I come from the other side, and I got no money." "Is your wife over here?" "Sure, I said, "I got a wife here." He said, "Mr. Fichera, don't worry about it. Set it up yourself nice and we're going to give you all the stuff you want, and you pay the rest little by little." They give me an opportunity, it was nice. So I fire one man, and I started working myself. My wife was a very educated woman. She's a dressmaker and hand embroiderer. She went to school, of course. And I didn't tell her my business, but she says, "Sal, I was thinking how are you finding things? They leave you any money?" And I tell her the truth, "Oh, no." "What (?)," she say, "I want to go work." I said, "No. I didn't marry you for work." I said, "You stay home. You don't have to work." I started working myself. Thank God, I make it up to her. But she wanted to go work. Said, "I could do these, dresses. Anything you want, coats." That's her trade. Went to school in Italy. I said, "No, you stay home, cook." When I got a home, rent a nice home by Phoenicia, had a lot of friends, a lot of Jewish people, friends, from the store, you know, they know me. My God. And I said to these people, ladies, I said, "Now I want to send my wife to school." "Don't worry," Jewish people. "We going to come and pick her up," says the night school. "We take her to school and we bring her back." Like this. And she was a very educated woman, and she passed in English. Before long she was talking, she started writing. By God, she was so wonderful. After that a while I said to my, I had a big store downtown, six hundred dollars a month. That time it was a big store. I said to my wife, I said, "Look here, Maria. How about we start some other business?" "Oh, sure," she said. I said, "What kind of business you want to start?" Ladies handbags, pocketbooks. But we don't know nothing about this business. So I come to New York and I ask her was this store's factory making bags, handbags. I show him, he say, "Over there on Fulton Street, Brigham Street,

Hamilton." That's a big one, you know New York. So I went over there. She was right. We started, we want to buy some handbags. They know, the Jewish people, they know I don't know nothing about the business. They help me out. They say to me, "I know, Mr. Fichera, you don't know nothing about, but we teach you." Now I said, "You buy this handbag, it cost you so much you've got to pay us, and no trust either, you've got to pay cash." They don't know me. "And you're going to make it double. It cost you a dollar, you've got to sell it for two dollars." "That's a lot." "No, no, no. You've got to make it double. On some thing, you've got to make it triple." They teach me, but I never take advantage. No, no, I never take. So we started with the little bag, and after we saw the luggage, big business. Jewelry. We went to New York, me and my wife. We bought a showcase. A beautiful store. Every, luggage, jewelry, handbag, shoes. But these shoes are not made good. New shoes, no, it was no good. I give it up. And my wife, she help me so much in the store. And we working together. Thank God, we don't get rich, it's okay. I can't complain. To stay on this place, a hundred dollars a day! Well, thank God. I could afford it. So we start our business. It was very good. People who work on the shoes, too, shoe repairing. And Thursday night all the stores were open till nine o'clock, and I work till nine o'clock. No shoes on Thursday night. Just on luggage and jewelry. My God, you ought to see. You make good money.

LEVINE: Did you make any of the luggage?

FICHERA: No. No, no, no. We buy in New York or Boston. They send it by the truck. Trunks. And my son, he used to deliver it. He used to deliver the trunks to Fairfield rich people.

LEVINE: So you were lucky that you married somebody that you didn't know. You didn't know your wife when you married her?

FICHERA: No, no, no. As a matter of fact, I was sixteen years older than her. Sixteen years older. My father was sixteen years older than my mother, but, and my, her mother, she said to her, and I ask her mother, I say, "Look here, how old your daughter?" I don't know. "She's twenty." "My God," I said, "Oh, no." I said, "I won't marry her. I'm sixteen years older than her." I said, "Look here, I am sixteen years older than her." I said, "We're going to ask her how old," she said. And her mother ask her, she said, "Maria, your boyfriend, he love you very much, want to take you to the United States, but he's sixteen years older than you." "It don't make no difference," she said. "I love him and I'm going to marry him." Thank God, a wonderful woman, a wonderful woman."

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: What was your wife like?

FICHERA: A short woman, very black hair, a nice complexion. Very nice looking, yeah. I thank God, we started working together in the store. She helped me a lot. On the luggage and the jewelry, custom jewelry she was in charge. And she put up orders to Boston and New York. And I'll tell you again, thank God we make a good business, a good living. Oh, yeah.

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LEVINE: So you had a big store.

FICHERA: A big store.

LEVINE: What's the difference between when you started, when you started in 1908, when you started with the little store?

FICHERA: Oh, 1908 was . . .

LEVINE: How did you start?

FICHERA: How did you start? There was a small shanty, a very small place. No machines. I told you before, no machines. You've got to stitch by hand, and nail. It was a very little store, seven dollars a month.

LEVINE: How did you get started? How did you get the money to get started first off?

FICHERA: Oh, well, you know, go to the leather people, buy a piece of leather. And I had a few dollars, and I started the business. I started, I went to the leather man, I say, "Mr. Herman," a Jewish fellow, I say, "I need this." "All right." They help me too, you know. They trust me. I started that way. Little by little we started getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Thank God we was a big business.

LEVINE: Good. (after conferring with Mr. Fichera's son) What about the meter for the electricity? The meter for the electricity?

FICHERA: The meter? The electric for the meter. This is a different story. When I come from Italy discharged from the army, my store, I didn't find no more store. It blow out everything. I find nothing at all. I didn't have no money and no store no more. I said, "My God, what am I going to do now?" So there was a little shanty right across on State Street in Bridgeport. Right across from the big store we had was a little shanty. I said, "My God, I'm going to go over there, and I'll rent this store." And I started my trade because people know me, know my family, just one family. So I find another store, I went to the owner, I said, "I want to rent your store over there on State Street. How much you want?" Fifteen dollars a month. And I had fifteen dollars. "Only fifteen dollars." I said, "All right, here. I'll rent the store." I had no tools to work. So I went to the fellow, I said, "Look here. I own no more that big store. Now I'm going to start across the street." And I buy the store for two dollar and a half leather, nails and a hammer. Two dollar and a half all together. And the man said, "I'm sorry. No trust for you no more." I said, "What I did? Did I owe you any money?" He said, "No, but the man you leave in the store, he owe us a lot of money, so I won't trust you for two dollars and a half." He wouldn't trust me. So what are you going to do? I put the sign, "Open For Business." But no, I thought for sure I could get that two dollar and a half with the store. I went to my brother-in-law. He had a shoemaker shop, too. It was on Thursday. I went over there. I said, "Paul, you know what happened to my business." He said, "I know." I said, "Now I'm open across the street, but the man, he won't trust me for two dollar and a half." I said, "Would you please loan me that two dollar and a half." It was on Thursday. He said, "Look, I got five dollars. Here two dollar and a half." He give me two dollar and a half. I went over there. I pay for the store, I started open. By God, the people that know my brother-in-law, my sister. "Oh, look, he's out again." They

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started to bring me shoes. Before you know, it was wonderful. It was not a very easy life, not very, But, thank God, I went through.

LEVINE: What about the electricity in the store?

FICHERA: Oh, the electrician, now. That's another thing. You've got to have an electrician. No machine, but you've got to have an electrician. So next store of mine, that little shanty, was a full store. A very nice, a Mr. Pete, Avilo. And I went to him. He know my brothers, he know my sisters and my grandchildren. Everybody. He said, "What do you want, Salvatore?" He come from the north of Italy. He talk Italian now. "What do you want, Salvatore?" I said, "Look here, I open the store, and they don't want to give me no light. They want a fifteen dollar deposit for the lights. No, five dollars deposit." I said, "Now, will you help me out?" "Go ahead." He went to the United Lumina Company. He signed, he was a big man, too. He signed and they opened the lights. That's a true as I am a living. That's the truth, as I'm living.

LEVINE: So then what children did you and your wife have? How many children did you and your wife have?

FICHERA: My son and my daughter.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

FICHERA: Anthony and Marian. And we lost two, yeah.

LEVINE: And you have grandchildren?

FICHERA: Oh, yeah. I have seven grandchildren now.

LEVINE: And what are your grandchildren's names?

FICHERA: Oh, my daughter's children is Laura. She's a lawyer. George, he's a very educated man, got a very good job. Another daughter, she's a manager of a big store, Waldbaums. You know Waldbaums? She's a manager over there. The other daughter, she's a houseworker.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what's their last names? What's your daughter's husband's name?

FICHERA: Sable. Hungarian. Hungarian, Sable. A very nice man. A very hard-working man. They got a beautiful home in the Trumbull. The Trumbull is a high place. Everything is fine.

LEVINE: And how about Anthony? Does Anthony have, your grandchildren?

FICHERA: Anthony, my son, he got three.

LEVINE: And what's their names?

FICHERA: Tom, he work for the state, Stamford. Renee, my mother's name. And Denise, she just come back from vacation. And my son, Anthony.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, when you think back over your life, when you think about your life, being born in Italy and coming here and going back and coming

back again . . .

FICHERA: Well, I met my wife over there.

LEVINE: Yes.

FICHERA: And I bring her over here. And I told, you know, I didn't find almost nothing, and she wanted to go to work. I told you before, I don't want her to work. You know what I was figuring? She don't know how to talk English. They're going to make a fool out of her. I said no, no, no. We rent a nice home, rent furnish, nice four rooms and I had a friend near that took her to school. I told you before. And my wife, she said to me, "What a wonderful country." "Ah," I said, "you like?" And after her brother's millionaire. Over in New York, they come over here, oh, big cars. It's wonderful. They want to help me a lot. And there was a nice piece of property on State Street for sale, and the real estate wanted to sell it to me. And I ask my wife, I said, "Marie," I said. "Look here, such a beautiful piece of property. They want to sell it to us." "Oh, no, no, no." She said, "No, no, you've got to work hard to pay for that property." So I went to her brother. Excuse me. I told him. "Gee, you should buy that property. I help you out." He was so nice, you know. He said, "I'll help you out." He died now, he's a millionaire.

LEVINE: So then did you buy the property?

FICHERA: No, no, no. One of those things, I didn't buy. I didn't buy, but . . .

LEVINE: What are you proudest of that you've done? When you think about all the things you did in your life, what are you proudest of?

FICHERA: What I did?

LEVINE: Yeah, what are you proudest of?

FICHERA: My proud, I'm working hard, before I told you. I help a lot of people, I help a lot of church, I help the Statue of Liberty. I spend the money. I can afford it. The Statue of Liberty, I send the money. I think I got my name over there. I don't know. They got my name?

LEVINE: If you sent it in, they must, yeah.

FICHERA: I sent the money. The Statue of Liberty, I help a lot of poor people. Thank God my conscience is clear. And not them, never take advantage from nobody.

LEVINE: Have you been enjoying your old age? Do you enjoy your life now?

FICHERA: No.

LEVINE: No?

FICHERA: No. But thank God, I tell you again. I got nice children, nice grandchildren. Is a wonderful, but one hundred years old, what life I got? Eat and sleep, eat and no use to it.

LEVINE: But you have your whole life to think about. You have a whole life to think of the wonderful life that you've had.

FICHERA: I had a wonderful life, a wonderful life. Me and my wife were enjoying so much.

LEVINE: And now you have all those wonderful memories. You have wonderful memories to think about.

FICHERA: Wonderful memory, I got it. I got to help a lot of my brothers. And my brother's son, my brother's son, he was a lieutenant in the police. And his son, the youngest general in Italy. The youngest general in Italy. They got him a prisoner in Africa, and he passed away. Very young. Now . . .

LEVINE: Can you remember any things that your mother or your father taught you that you learned, things to live by, ideas about how to live?

FICHERA: Yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

FICHERA: Always my father, and my father, they always tell, "Be good to you and for somebody else. If you can afford it, help always poor people." That's what he used to tell us. "We cannot afford you to send you to college." As a matter of fact, my uncle, my mother's brother, I told you before, was a priest, and now the young fellow was a priest, too. My uncle, he wanted to send me to college to be a priest. I said, "You're crazy. I don't want no priest."

LEVINE: Wait, was your family, were your mother and father religious? Your mother

and father, were they religious?

FICHERA: Oh, yes. Very religious.

LEVINE: So why didn't you want to be a priest?

FICHERA: Oh, I don't want to be a priest. I said, "I'm another type." Believe me. He knock me down on the ground and he started to beat me. "Don't cost your mother another penny." He was a rich man. "I'll support you, but I want you to be a priest." I said, "Uncle, I don't want to be priest." My mother come around, she pick him. "Hey!" Said, "You're going to kill my son." "No," he said. "I want to send him to school to be a priest." I said, "Forget about it. I don't want to be a priest."

LEVINE: Did you or anybody in your family play musical instruments?

FICHERA: No, no, but I played.

LEVINE: What did you play?

FICHERA: Banjo and mandolin.

LEVINE: And what did you like to play?

FICHERA: Oh, I love the mandolin, and before here, in the United States. I learned here. I went to school for it. We had it in the orchestra.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. In Bridgeport?

FICHERA: In Bridgeport, yeah. My own orchestra, guitar . . .

LEVINE: What did you call it? Did it have a name?

FICHERA: No, no. You're too young for us. It was a barber, a shoemaker, a carpenter, a plumber. All young fellows got together and we had our own music. We played violin, my brother was playing guitar, my nephew was playing guitar, and mandolin, and I played banjo, and mandolin are about the same. And we had a little orchestra. Now, the Italian people, with the holidays, Carnival, you know, Carnival. They make a lot of feasts, you know. On Pembroke Street. You don't know Bridgeport anyway. A lot of Italian section. They come on, hey, a little orchestra, you know. Violin, a very good player.

LEVINE: You played for the feasts? You would play at the feasts?

FICHERA: No, violin. The banjo. Mandolin. And they said, "You want to come tonight? Halloween. We're going to have a big feast. Do you want to play for us?" I said, "Sure." I said, "How much you pay?" That's the first thing. "Fifty cents each." From nine to twelve, one o'clock at night, fifty cents each.

LEVINE: And where else did you play?

FICHERA: Me? Just the banjo.

LEVINE: No, where else? Did you play for other events? When did the orchestra

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play? What did they play for?

FICHERA: The same orchestra, I told you. We had a bunch together. We used to go out and make fifty cents each and wedding or baptize, dancing, I eat, my God, what you want? Carnival, we used to go in the Italian section, from nine o'clock to one, two o'clock in the morning. Fifty cents each. Eat all you want, a beautiful spaghetti, macaroni, homemade sausage. (they laugh)

LEVINE: So you had a good time?

FICHERA: Oh, we could eat, too. Yeah, we had a, one man started dancing, you know, polka, waltz, all different thing. (he imitates)

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Well, maybe that's a good place for us to stop, on that happy note. Maybe we'll stop here. And I want to thank you for a wonderful, wonderful story.

FICHERA: Oh! You understand what I said?

LEVINE: I did.

FICHERA: Well, I appreciate it very much. Thanks very much.

LEVINE: Well, I appreciate it. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here with Salvatore Fichera right here in Stratford, Connecticut and it's June 3, 1992, and Mr. Fichera is one hundred years old.

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FICHERA: That's right!

END OF INTERVIEW