

EI-200

ANGELO VACCA

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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RESIDENCES: ITALY: FROSOLENE: US: MIDDLETOWN, NY

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, August 3, 1992. I'm in Lenox, Massachusetts with Angelo Vacca, who came from Italy in 1909 when he was eleven years old. Today is Mr. Vacca's ninety-sixth birthday, and I'm in the home of his daughter and son-in-law. Good morning.

VACCA: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Can we start, Mr. Vacca, by you giving me your birth date.

VACCA: My birth date?

SIGRIST: Yes. The month and the year that you were born.

VACCA: August 3, 1896.

SIGRIST: Okay. And where were you born, sir?

VACCA: I was born in Italy.

SIGRIST: Where?

VACCA: In the town of Frosolene, F-R-O-S-O-L-E-N-E.

SIGRIST: And where is that in Italy?

VACCA: It's in the province of Campobasso, C-A-M-P-O-B-A-S-S-O.

SIGRIST: Where in Italy is that?

VACCA: It's about, oh, almost to the southern part, not too far up.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the town that you were born in?

VACCA: The town?

SIGRIST: Yes. Do you remember what the town looked like?

VACCA: Oh, it was a nice little town when I left, and I was sorry to leave it. And I'll tell you why. I wasn't at all tickled to come to the United States.

SIGRIST: Can you sort of describe for me what the town looked like?

VACCA: Well, the town, they're not like here. They're in (he coughs), they're in a location where there are no trees and there are all stone homes and things like that, and the people are all around minding their own business and working here and there, you know.

SIGRIST: What kinds of work did people do in that town?

VACCA: Well, most of them were farmers, and there was a few people that made cutlery and things like that. Now they have (he laughs), I don't know anything.

SIGRIST: Cutlery, like knives and things?

VACCA: Knives, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there an iron mine or some kind of metal mining going on near there?

VACCA: What kind of metal? I'll tell you, where I used to go to this province town, the capital of the state, and I bring the products there, and then bring back the iron and stuff that they had to make stuff with, and worked there. When they got through, it's completed, we'd bring them back.

SIGRIST: Was this a big town or a small town?

VACCA: Well, it was a pretty good sized town. It had three main parishes.

SIGRIST: Parishes, churches?

VACCA: Churches, yeah, and then a lot of small ones. And they'd all get together on things like that, and I remember once or twice a year we used to have a big feast for some saint. I remember mostly Saint Anthony, which I was named after, second name.

SIGRIST: What did you do for the feast of Saint Anthony? What do you remember about that?

VACCA: What could I do? Just mill around with the crowd. And, you know, can I, what can a boy do, just look around. What can they do? (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, did they have some kind of special celebration, or did they have a statue or something?

VACCA: Well, they used to bring the statue out and have a little session and then the main thing was the fireworks that they used to have, then go home and go to bed.

SIGRIST: Was this something that the whole town looked forward

to?

VACCA: The whole town used to participate in that.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house for me that you lived in?

VACCA: Well, it was on the second story, and I had a big long stairway to climb to get to outdoors. That was during the summer. One thing I remember, very distinctly remember, when the 20th Century came in the celebration they had in the wintertime. They moved all the snow around and they had parades in there, and different people dressed in different costumes representing the twelve months of the year. And that I used to enjoy. (he laughs) And (?). And I remember I fell off the stairway into the snow pile.

SIGRIST: You were a young kid at that point. Who lived underneath you? Who lived underneath you? You lived on the second floor, you said. What was underneath you?

VACCA: Well, it was a cutlery shop, and what they call a wine shop, a saloon, like. And that's all about it. And it was all, all the neighbors mind their own. And I used to love to walk to church, which was nearby, as a

boy.

SIGRIST: How far away was the church? How far was the church?

VACCA: Oh, about two or three blocks, like, from here, like.
And that's what I enjoyed. And I tried hard to go
back, but I could never make it.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the church?

VACCA: St. Mary's.

SIGRIST: And can you kind of describe the church for me a
little bit?

VACCA: (he clears his throat) Well, I don't know. There
was high steps going into it, and the main entrance.
One thing I remember very distinctly, lightening
struck the main bell, and they had to take it down.
And they brought it in to this monastery over there
and they had to remold it. And they had it in there,
and then everybody donated what odds and ends of
silver and gold that they had and mixed it all in.
And I remember going to it when they were pouring the
fluid, and a little place in the church floor that
they had dug out at the monastery. And then when the
bell was completed over there, I think they had all

the people in town, all the people had oxen and horses pulling that on a ski. And I think the people that were at the church started pulling over there. And then finally they brought it back up again, and then the first sound of that could be heard about four, five miles.

SIGRIST: So that was an exciting thing for the town?

VACCA: That was an exciting thing.

SIGRIST: Wow. I want to ask you a couple of more questions about the apartment that you lived in. How many rooms did you have?

VACCA: We had (he laughs), it was one big room sectioned off with the bedrooms and the kitchen. It was all in one, open fireplace.

SIGRIST: How did you light the apartment?

VACCA: With kerosene lamps. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And how did, how was the cooking done?

VACCA: It was done over the open fire on kettles, you know, hanging from rope with chains over the fire and that's where the cooking was done. And sometimes they used

charcoal for cooking meats and stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Did you eat a lot of meat?

VACCA: We didn't eat too much meat, no, but we had a lot of good food.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you eat as a child in Italy?

VACCA: The what?

SIGRIST: What kind of foods did you eat as a child in Italy?

VACCA: Well, we had different things, like we have toasted bread in the morning with milk and something like that. We never know what butter was. We didn't have all these nice things. But we ate pretty good.

SIGRIST: Did your mother make one kind of food that was your favorite, the thing that you looked forward to the most?

VACCA: She used to make very good tomato sauce and she used to make lovely bread. She used to bake the bread and then take it to the place where they used to cook it in the ovens, or some place. They had no stoves to cook them in.

SIGRIST: Where did she get the grain to make the bread?

VACCA: Where she got the . . .

SIGRIST: The grain to make the bread? The grain or the flour?

VACCA: The flour, we used to go to the mill and grind the grains. The grain was, to get the flour out from that.

SIGRIST: How did they grind the grain? How did they grind it?

VACCA: How did what?

SIGRIST: How did they mill the grain? How did they grind it?

VACCA: They would with stones, you know, in the stones they used to grind it, two with the water wheels.

SIGRIST: Was this right in town, or did you have to go outside?

VACCA: Oh, you had to go out. And then you had to carry water from the main fountain to the house. We had no plumbing. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What did you carry the water in?

VACCA: In a little tub or buckets. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

VACCA: Eugene.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

VACCA: (he coughs) Well, when I knew him he was working in the forest and making charcoal, cutting down trees and doing like that. And then when he done that, I think, till he came to America.

SIGRIST: What year did he come?

VACCA: That I don't know. But I was small. I had a sister and a little brother. My brother was about a year old when he left.

SIGRIST: What was your sister's name?

VACCA: Um, well, they call her Mary now. And my little brother was Michael. He, excuse me, he died last year.

SIGRIST: Oh. What was your father, what was he like as a person? What was his personality like?

VACCA: My father? To tell you the truth, I didn't even know him. I didn't remember anything about him until I saw him in New York.

SIGRIST: When you saw him in New York, we'll jump ahead a bit.

When you saw him in New York, what did you think?

VACCA: Well, I was told, my mother told me that, that was my father. And that's all I knew, when he met us over there.

SIGRIST: So it didn't mean a whole lot to you.

VACCA: Well, then it did. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

VACCA: Mary.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

VACCA: Notte, N-O-T-T-E.

SIGRIST: And was she from this village?

VACCA: Village, yeah.

SIGRIST: And was your father also from this town?

VACCA: He was from another town. I don't know where he was from.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

VACCA: I didn't know how they met. They didn't tell me.

SIGRIST: What did your mother look like? When you were a little boy, what did she look like?

VACCA: Oh, I wished I knew. I would have brought you the picture of her. I got a picture of her upstairs. She was nice, slim. She was a beautiful woman, and took good care of us.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like?

VACCA: Very happy. We were supposed to come to this country when, I think it was two years before that. My father made a mistake. He sent the cash instead of a ticket. My grandfather got sick, and my mother stayed, spent the money and stayed there. And then the second time he sent no cash, a paid ticket.

SIGRIST: And that's when you came.

VACCA: And that's when we came, yeah.

SIGRIST: You said that you, so you had grandparents in this town also?

VACCA: My grandfather was in the town, and my uncle, my mother's brother lived there.

SIGRIST: So the grandfather is your mother's father.

VACCA: The grandfather is my mother's father.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandfather?

VACCA: Oh, he was a big, strapping guy. Oh. (he laughs)
When he said something to me he meant it. But he was
awful nice to me.

SIGRIST: What did he do for a living?

VACCA: He had a few cows that he used to take care of and a
few sheep. And that's what he done, and he used to
make cheese, mostly, like.

SIGRIST: How did he make the cheese? Do you remember?

VACCA: I don't remember that. I remember it was good, that's
all.

SIGRIST: Was there a grandmother, too?

VACCA: My grandmother, she died earlier. Adn then I had a
step-grandmother, and I didn't like her.

SIGRIST: Why didn't you like her?

VACCA: Oh, she was mean. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did she ever, did she ever punish you for anything?

VACCA: Oh, yeah. Every time I ever did, I didn't do something, boy, I got slapped or something like that. Not hard, but she, I didn't like her.

SIGRIST: So you probably didn't spend a lot of time with these people.

VACCA: I didn't spend too much time with her, but I was with my grandfather a lot.

SIGRIST: Was it hard for your mother after your father went to America, when she was alone with the kids?

VACCA: That I don't know, but I think he sent a supply of money all the time.

SIGRIST: Did she ever work to take in any money?

VACCA: Well, she used to take care of a, what do I say? She was like, she used to take care of an old lady. They used to pay her for that. That's all I know.

SIGRIST: Did the old lady live with you, or did she go . . .

VACCA: No, she lived next by, a couple of doors by.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did your mother do for the old lady?

VACCA: What did she do?

SIGRIST: Yes, for the woman?

VACCA: Well, what could she do? She done a lot of sewing and a lot of, well, whatever, what can a woman do? What can a small guy remember what she done or what she didn't do.

SIGRIST: You said your grandfather had gotten sick. Do you remember what he was sick?

VACCA: He fell off the horse, and he died at eighty-seven, ninety-seven.

SIGRIST: And that's when your mother spent the money.

VACCA: She stayed. She wouldn't leave him when he was sick.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what it was like for you? What did you do for fun in this town?

VACCA: Well, what do kids do? Just go play and that's all.

SIGRIST: Did you have any chores that were yours that you remember?

VACCA: No. I never remember.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school?

VACCA: I went there for three or four years.

SIGRIST: Well, talk to me a little bit about what school was like in Italy?

VACCA: Well, that, oh, school. A bunch of boys over there at school, not much to tell about. (he clears his throat) I learned to write and read a bit. And then we started to talk to the teachers about different countries. And then America came over there. And I told him, I said, "We're going to America next year." And then he said, "I'm glad for you. I wish I was going."

SIGRIST: Did a lot of people go to America from your town, that you remember?

VACCA: Well, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was the school one building? I mean, was it a one-room school?

VACCA: One-room school, first, second, third grade,

altogether.

SIGRIST: So you were in with your brothers and sisters, with your brother and your sister?

VACCA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about, for instance, did you ever have a job in Italy? You were a boy, but did you ever do anything for money?

VACCA: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that. Well, when you were growing up, what did you know about America? Your father was here.

VACCA: (he coughs) Well, we knew, we were told that things were altogether different here, and people over there, and they spoke a different language, which we couldn't understand. But I learned pretty fast.

SIGRIST: What job did your father get when he came over here?

VACCA: At what time?

SIGRIST: What job did he get when he came over here?

VACCA: He was a molder in a cast iron shop. He used to make

these toys, you know, toy pistols, different toys out of cast iron.

SIGRIST: Where did he live here?

VACCA: He lived in Middletown, Connecticut.

SIGRIST: Did he have relatives who had come to America?

VACCA: Huh?

SIGRIST: Did he have any relatives in this country?

VACCA: Did I have? No.

SIGRIST: Did he have?

VACCA: No. He had friends in here.

SIGRIST: Is that why he came?

VACCA: That's when he came over.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt about leaving your town?

VACCA: Well, I was tickled to be. I was glad I was going to America, but then I was sorry I left all my little friends, you know, that I had, and I wanted to know what they would do, and that's it.

SIGRIST: How do you think your mother felt about having to leave her home?

VACCA: Well, she didn't feel too good about it, but she says we had to come here, and we came here. But we got settled pretty good.

SIGRIST: So your father had intended to bring you over sooner. And your mother spent the money. (Mr. Vacca laughs.) So two years go by, and you guys get ready to go. And it's your mother and your sister and your brother. And that was all, right?

VACCA: That was all.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing?

VACCA: Well, I remember she had a great big box, like a trunk, made, and she packed a lot of stuff, but what she packed I wouldn't know. I know that she had that, and I think it was about two days before we left somebody came and picked up the trunk and we didn't see it until we got to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you, where did you leave from?

VACCA: From Naples.

SIGRIST: And how did you get from your town to Naples?

VACCA: Well, from our town we went like a stage coach, horse-driven, to a railroad head. I think the name of the railroad was Candaluvo. We used to go over there. I never had seen a train before, and I was excited.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the train ride to Naples?

VACCA: The train ride we had, we went through two tunnels, long tunnels, under the mountains.

SIGRIST: Had your mother ever been on a train before?

VACCA: I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Was it exciting or was it scary?

VACCA: I wasn't scared at all. I was all excited about it. One of those new things, you know, like that. And the only riding I used to do was a little on a horse back or horse wagon. That was the only riding I used to do.

SIGRIST: So this train is kind of an exciting thing.

VACCA: Oh, the train was exciting, yeah.

SIGRIST: So how long did you stay in Naples?

VACCA: (he coughs) I think we were, we got to Naples when we went on a steamer, on the boat.

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay overnight in Naples before you got . . .

VACCA: We stayed overnight in Naples on the boat.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

VACCA: And then the next day we took off.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

VACCA: This was in July.

SIGRIST: July, you came. Tell me what it was like seeing a boat for the first time?

VACCA: No, it wasn't in July. It was late in August, late in June.

SIGRIST: Late in June.

VACCA: In June. Because we didn't get to this country until July. When I saw the boat, I had never seen a boat before. I had never seen the ocean. I used to go to a place, the lakes, something like that. I was

amazed. And then I saw Mount Vesuvius, and I remember that I think it was 1906 or 1907 around there when it blew up. I remember that. And I was caught in the (?). We got caught in it.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where you slept on the boat?

VACCA: Well, to begin with, I was separated from my mother and put in with the men, the men's section. I didn't like that, and I started roaming around the boat till I find my mother and I'll stayed there. And she said, "I can't even have enough room for you to sleep in." And there's a lady sleeping on the upper deck over there. She says, "He can sleep here, up here." She says, "I'm alone up here. You can sleep up here." So I stayed there.

SIGRIST: So was that one big room with lots of people in it, or was it a small room?

VACCA: It was a big room. Of course, we didn't come first class. We came down in the bottom in steerage.
(he laughs)

SIGRIST: Was that pleasant?

VACCA: We look out of the port hole and see the water.

(he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

VACCA: I didn't, but my poor mother was sick all the way over from Gibraltar till we got to this country. She was sick every day, all day, all the time. But I didn't.

SIGRIST: Were a lot of people sick?

VACCA: They were seasick, yes. Some got over it, some didn't.

SIGRIST: If you got sick did they have a bathroom or something for you?

VACCA: There was a public room there that we all went.

SIGRIST: What, go ahead.

VACCA: But everybody was awful good. The only objection that I had, nobody spoke Italian. Only the people that we were with.

SIGRIST: You mean, like, the crew didn't speak Italian.

VACCA: We had to have an interpreter all the time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat?

VACCA: No.

SIGRIST: Was it an Italian line, or . . .

VACCA: I think it was an English line.

SIGRIST: An English line. What else do you remember about being on the boat?

VACCA: Oh, I loved it, going around and seeing the things. I spent most of my time. And then I went by the kitchen one day and I asked the guy to get some chicken broth for my mother over there, and he gave me, he was very nice about it, and gave a panful of it, and I brought it out to her. Then I got acquainted with him and I used to go up there and help him in the kitchen wash the pans, scrape them. They were good. They give me food that my mother could take. Take a roast chicken, or things like that. I used to take them down to her. And as for me I ate anything. (he laughs) And I just loved the ride. I was always up there. I used to go to the forward deck, and I used to like to see the, sit there, wonder what everything was all about. Your first time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, were there any storms?

VACCA: No. We had no storms, no. I don't remember any storms.

SIGRIST: Was the boat crowded? Was the boat crowded?

VACCA: It was crowded. I don't know. There were quite a few people there. Whether there was too many people or not, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the people, seeing people from first and second class?

VACCA: I used to see them. But they were, they kept on their own. They had different things. It cost them more to come over. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: How long was the trip?

VACCA: Well, a little over two weeks, I think.

SIGRIST: Were you sorry to see it come to an end?

VACCA: Well, I was, in a way. But then I said, "Well, this is it. This is America."

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

VACCA: I saw it on the way from Ellis Island to New York, but I didn't see it until then.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your impressions from the boat of the skyline of New York?

VACCA: Well, the skyline. I could see some tall buildings. There weren't too many tall buildings then. There weren't too many tall buildings then. But I know that during the time there was a lot of boats that went up and down and back, small ones, big ones and all. But everybody was so nice to us. And every time I talked to somebody he didn't answer me, so I used to go bring the guy to talk to. But we were on the boat two overnights when we landed, and then I think it was even the third or the fourth of July we went off the boat to Ellis Island and we all got separated, and that's when the trunk came back. And we were all assigned there. They put the shipping tags on us.
(he laughs)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

VACCA: And then somebody came over, he says, "We're going over to," Oh, I think they used to call it The Battery, at that time, in New York. He said, "We're going to The Battery." He said, "We've got to go on a

boat." Oh, my mother was, started to get sick when she heard the name boat again, she started to get sick. And that was, well, what I know now was like a ferry boat, you know, and we were all over there. And it was a trip from New York to The Battery. It was a wonderful trip for me. I looked all over the place. And that's when I saw the Statue of Liberty.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw it?

VACCA: Well, I had seen a picture of it, pictures of it in different books. I see, I had seen, I thought it was a beautiful, a beautiful monument, and it still is.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about Ellis Island? What struck you about Ellis Island as an eleven-year-old boy?

VACCA: On Ellis Island we were there. We were fed. We had somebody giving us food. And checked for eyesight, ears, and they put a stethoscope, I didn't know what that little, what it was then but I know now. And we all passed the examination, and then we were all told to stay in one place because we had to go to The Battery with the boat, leave on a boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what they fed you? Do you remember

what they fed you at Ellis Island? You said they gave you some food. What was that? Do you remember?

VACCA: Oh, sandwiches or something like that.

SIGRIST: Was it something different that you had never seen before?

VACCA: That I hadn't seen before, no.

SIGRIST: Why do you think you had to stay overnight on the boat for a couple of days?

VACCA: They had to go quarantine. We were all examined on the boat if everybody was sick or like that, you know. And we had to stay on the boat. And then from the boat I remember seeing the fireworks, from the boat. That must have been July. But I was, I was tickled. My little brother got lost on the boat. We had a heck of a time trying to find him. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Where did you finally find him?

VACCA: (he laughs) We didn't find him. Somebody brought him to us.

SIGRIST: Your mother must have been very . . .

VACCA: Oh, she was.

SIGRIST: Between being sick and having kids to be responsible for.

VACCA: My little brother. (he sighs) I don't know.

SIGRIST: Where did your . . .

VACCA: It's a long time between now and then.

SIGRIST: Yes. Where did your father meet you?

VACCA: He met us at The Battery. We were scheduled to come by boat from New York to Middletown. There was a riverboat runner over there, and she didn't like that idea. But, and then while we were there, you know, like a little compartment. We were told to stay there and not to move around because we had to go to The Battery and stay together. Of course, we were all tagged anyway. And then all of a sudden two men were coming down the stairway, you know. And my mother spotted him, spotted my father, he says, "Papa." I looked. I had forgotten what he looked like, you know. And he had come with a friend of his and picked us up, and then we came, went to Middletown by train.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your mother greeted your father?

VACCA: How does a woman greet? Hugged him, kissed him. He come over here and he hugged me and patted me on the back. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did he bring presents for you?

VACCA: Not there, but he had presents home. He didn't bring any presents.

SIGRIST: What presents did he have waiting for you?

VACCA: Well, I should tell you. A baseball bat and a glove. That was one which I had never seen or used before. And all the other boys had some, you know. And I started playing. And I asked him, I said, "What are these for?" And he says, "You play with these," he says.

SIGRIST: Sort of, "Welcome to America." Tell me about where he lived in Middletown. What was the house like or the apartment like?

VACCA: Well, it was a four-family house to begin with. And it was, well, I think they called it the North End of the town. And they were all mixed nationalities in

there, which I found out later is Irish, Swedes and Polish people, Italian people. And they all spoke their own language. But I made up my mind that I was going to learn and learn it fast.

SIGRIST: Learn English. How did you learn it?

VACCA: Well, to begin with I joined with a bunch of Irish guys. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: The Irish don't like the Italians very much.

VACCA: Oh, we got along well. We got along pretty well.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first word was, the first word you learned in English?

VACCA: What do you learn? How do you say, "No, yes, come here or go there." But I, I got along pretty good.

SIGRIST: Did you go right to Middletown or did you stay in New York?

VACCA: No, we stayed right, went right from New York to Middletown.

SIGRIST: So you weren't in New York overnight or anything.

VACCA: No.

SIGRIST: You went right over. Tell me a little bit about how your mother adjusted to America?

VACCA: Well, she had a hard time adjusting because she didn't speak and it took her a long time to learn a few words, you know. And she had time, but she had a lot of friends that were Italians. She traded in Italian stores. And we learned like that.

SIGRIST: Did she ever learn to speak English?

VACCA: She did.

SIGRIST: How did she learn?

VACCA: Well, through us, through the children, she learned. We used to try to talk to her in English all the time, but she learned some, and she made out all right.

SIGRIST: Your father still had the job as the molder at this point.

VACCA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get a job?

VACCA: No.

SIGRIST: Did, do you remember ever going to your father's place of business? Did you ever go visit him at work, for instance?

VACCA: At work, yeah. We used to go, every afternoon after school we used to go over there and watch through the windows how they used to pour the hot metal.
(he laughs)

SIGRIST: Kind of like the bell in Italy in a way.

VACCA: We didn't see that. That was just running. But this they had to carry it.

SIGRIST: Was it hard work for your dad?

VACCA: Well, I imagine it was, but he liked it.

SIGRIST: What did you find in America that was so different than it had been in Italy? Was there something about America that was very different than what you were used to?

VACCA: Well, what can a child who, what's different. You learn to play ball. You learn this, you learn that. And other things like that. And then going to school.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about school in Middletown?

VACCA: Well, one thing I remember, I think the second year that I was there they built a big grandstand in front of the school. It was a parochial school. And President Taft came by, and it was the first time I ever saw a president. (he laughs) And I had a picture of that, but I lost it. And that was it. Then he went, and I remember Roosevelt coming through the town in Middletown.

SIGRIST: Theodore.

VACCA: Yeah. You know. (sound of clothing rustling)

SIGRIST: What, how was school different here than it had been in Italy?

VACCA: Well, the arithmetic was about the same. The wordings were different, and you had to learn them. And you start A-B-C and you think right, "No, yes."
(he laughs) And I'll tell you, that was different. But I made out pretty good.

SIGRIST: What grade did they put you in?

VACCA: They put me in the second grade. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What was that like, being so much older?

VACCA: That I didn't like, but I had to make the best, but I advanced fast because I knew arithmetic and things like that. I knew history pretty good. It was the same, only in different words. That was in Italian, this was in English.

SIGRIST: Did you find that the teachers were helpful because you didn't necessarily know English?

VACCA: Well, they done the best they could. They tried to explain to us, but they didn't speak Italian. They were nuns.

SIGRIST: Was this an Italian Catholic school or an Irish Catholic school?

VACCA: An Irish Catholic school.

SIGRIST: Were the nuns very strict with you?

VACCA: No. One was, but I conquered her. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: How did you do that?

VACCA: Because I used to do everything she didn't tell me to do. (he laughs) She was a great, she was a great lady. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did, what was the first job you ever got?

VACCA: My job?

SIGRIST: What was the first job you ever got as a young man?

VACCA: I went to, I think I was about six, sixteen. And I went to a mill where they used to make tin ware, and I was a welder, electric welder, you know. And a welder that handled the orders. Sometimes you burned them and sometimes you didn't.

SIGRIST: How did you get that job?

VACCA: I went and applied for it, and they needed somebody, so they, that's it. And I was getting big money. Four dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Now, what did you do with that money?

VACCA: I gave it to my mother and father.

SIGRIST: So you were still living with them?

VACCA: Oh, I lived with them all the time until I went to war.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you have that job for a long time?

VACCA: No. I didn't have it, for four or five months. And when I was seventeen, about seventeen-and-a-half. I was born mid-year. And I think it was about eight in November, I think around November that I joined the National Guards. Then, in the spring of '16, we went to Mexico, to Arizona, to Mexico on a Mexican campaign.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about that. What was that . . .

VACCA: Oh, that was a lot of fun. We got there and put up camp. We had no water. They had to drill for water, but we had to get some awful thunderstorms we didn't like. It was right on, well, about a quarter of a mile from the Rio Grande.

SIGRIST: Was this during the Mexican Revolution at that time?

VACCA: It was Villa's campaign. Villa was in the town, that's what they brought us down there. Then we came back about six months later, and then the following year the war broke out in April and it was '17. Then we went to France.

SIGRIST: I'd like to talk about your experience in World War I. Tell me what it was like being in France at that

time.

VACCA: That was when we were soldiers and things like that. And we left, we left Connecticut by train. We went to Montreal. We got on the boat in Montreal and went up to, I know now there's the St. Lawrence River to Halifax by boat. And then we parked there about a week or a little more, and they formed a big convoy and they took us to France. And we landed in Southampton, England. And we were there about a week, and then we went to Le Havre, France. And from there to a place called Neuciton, and then from there to camp, I remember the name of the town, Landerville.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you see in France at that time?

VACCA: Well, we didn't see too much because we didn't get around too much. We were in isolated areas in small towns, and there was no transportation, only through the military we had and like that. And we didn't get too far. We met different people. The French people used to take us to their house and have a dinner, for dinner on a Sunday. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: How did the French feel about the American soldiers?

VACCA: They felt pretty good, pretty good. They felt pretty good. They done whatever they could for us.

SIGRIST: Going back across the ocean and going to rural France, did any of that remind you of being a kid in Italy and having come across the ocean?

VACCA: That was the second time I crossed the ocean, once coming and once going.

SIGRIST: Was it as much fun the second time?

VACCA: The second time I knew what I was doing and dodging German submarines.

SIGRIST: Now, when you were in France did you do any active fighting?

VACCA: I don't remember. We went in the trenches in seven, no, eight. I think February 18, and we didn't get out until the Armistice in November. I was wounded once.

SIGRIST: How? How were you wounded?

VACCA: I got a shot right from here right through the top eye over here which I had to go to the hospital for.

SIGRIST: Just under the eyebrow.

VACCA: Just below the eyebrow. And then I went back to the company again. We had the big skirmishes on April the 20th, we lost a lot of men, but I didn't get a scratch then. I came out.

SIGRIST: Other people were not so lucky.

VACCA: A lot of people. We lost quite a few people. And then we got replacements from all over, all over the country, including Indians. Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did it feel having come from a different country to America? How did you feel about fighting for America?

VACCA: Well, I thought that it was nice to be helpful and that it was my country and I was going to fight for it.

SIGRIST: What kind of fighting was done? Was it hand-to-hand fighting, or . . .

VACCA: We didn't have all the sophisticated things. What they got today, you know. Today the infantry was motorized. Then it was on foot. And all we had was a bayonet, the rifle and ammunition and grenades. But I

was in three major battles. And then I got hit, a hole in a rifle, you know, I got hit right across here, split the rifle up, and I had to back to the hospital again.

SIGRIST: Right across your fingers.

VACCA: There is one stiff one here, right across the top of these three. If this had happened to be a little further up I would have got it. And I had to go to the hospital again, and in another three weeks I'm back again.

SIGRIST: Well, you were really very lucky. How did you feel when the war ended?

VACCA: Oh, we were happy. We thought the end of the world had come. Everything was so quiet we could hear the birds flying. (he laughs) Everything like that. And then I think it was in, oh, a town there in Alsace Lorraine, and the name of St. Mihiel over there. Over there the people greeted us nice. Even the Germans and the people wanted to swap cigarettes for beer tablets. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Beer tablets?

VACCA: Tablets, yeah.

SIGRIST: What is a beer tablet?

VACCA: Well, it's like a cough drop. You put it in water and let it dissolve and it made beer. (he laughs) And then we were stopped from doing that. No veterans could fraternize with them at all. So they kept ahead of us in order we followed them right up to the Rhine.

SIGRIST: When did you finally return to the States? When did you finally return to the States? When did you go back home from France?

VACCA: When I came back?

SIGRIST: Yes. When did you come?

VACCA: I came back, I went back home in '19, early. Yeah, it was early, it was during the winter months over there. Well, we landed in New York. And then we had to go to Camp Devons in Massachusetts. And I went right through the town where I used to live in Middletown there, right over the Connecticut River. And I could see my mother sweeping the back porch. Oh, I felt so bad. I was so near and still so far. And then we got to Camp Devons. I was still hospitalized. I came

home in a hospital ship. I came home. And while I was in the hospital, it was a navy hospital in Brooklyn. The second or the third day we had a, we were lousy. (he laughs) Took all our clothes away and we had to go through a bath, walk through a bath up to our necks to get rid of all the lice.

(he laughs) (he coughs) I was walking down over there in the bathrobe, you know, and who do you think I saw? My father. They came to see me, because the Red Cross notified him that I was home. My father came to see me. Oh, was he glad. And then he, first thing he wanted to know was to see my hand. They had told him, the Red Cross notified them, told them that I was okay except my fourth finger in the left hand. And still being sore, I had it in my pocket, you know. He grabbed it and pulled it out and he saw it. And he, oh, he changed color. If somebody, he was sort of illiterate. And somebody read the postcard to him that he got from the Red Cross, and it says, "He's missing four fingers."

SIGRIST: Well, so he was pleasantly surprised.

VACCA: Oh, he was surprised! He was surprised.

SIGRIST: When did you get to see your mother again?

VACCA: I saw her after, a week after I got to Camp Devons. We went to Camp Devons, then, from New York to Camp Devons. And from there we were sitting down in the barracks. A door opened over there and a sergeant stepped up. I was a sergeant, too. He stepped up. He says, he hollered, "Attention!" Inspections was coming through. I looked at him. He says, "That means you too." I says, "No." I says, "I don't have to get up. I'm sick list." I says, "I don't have to get up." He says, "I'm in command here." I says, "I know you are, and I respect your command, but I don't have to get up." The door opens, and the major came by. I saw him, I said, "You son of a gun, Jim. How are you?" And he says, "Angie," he says. "Oh!" He put his hands around me and he told the sarge to carry on. And he sat there with me, we reminisced. He was company commander. He was captain of my company when I got hit. And he was hit too, but he was sent back home. And he was (?). From captain he went to major, and he was in charge up at Devons. And he says, "What can I do for you?" I said, "Well," I said, "the best thing you can do," I says, "get me home. I want to

see my mother." And he says, he gave me a pass,
unlimited. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: So that's when you got to see her.

VACCA: And then I got home to see the whole family.

SIGRIST: Was that emotional for you?

VACCA: Oh, was that! From the railroad station I saw my
brother. I called him by the wrong name. He says,
"No." He says, "I'm not John. I'm Phil."

SIGRIST: I have only a minute left.

VACCA: They were putting, they were pretty grown up then.

SIGRIST: Your mother must have been very happy.

VACCA: She was. And then the family downstairs. They came
up to see us to, you know. We were all friends, you
know, before I left. And I remember there was a,
later he became my father-in-law. He says, "What can
I get you?" I says, "What you can get for me, a nice
glass of beer." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: It's got to be better than the beer tablets.

VACCA: And then in 1921 I married his daughter.

SIGRIST: I have one final quick question for you, because we're just about to run out of time. Are you glad that you came to this country?

VACCA: I sure am. I sure am very glad. I had a good living, good times, met a lot of people, rich and poor. The McCormicks, the Rockefellers, I met them. I met the, oh, the Stevenses from New York.

SIGRIST: Well, and you saw Taft.

VACCA: In a short time I met a lot of people, a lot of good people. Everybody was nice.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Vacca, I want to thank you very much for letting me come out here.

VACCA: Oh, you're welcome.

SIGRIST: And interview you about your immigration experience to this country, and again I want to wish you a very happy ninety-sixth birthday.

VACCA: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Thank you. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service with Angelo Vacca.