

EI-273

VINCENZA FELICE CASSARINO

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 4/1994

SICILY, 1910

AGE 6

PORT OF EMBARCATION: NAPLES

**RESIDENCES: MASCHITO
SCHNECTADY, NY**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, March 30, 1993. I'm in New Britain, Connecticut with Vincenza Cassarino, who came from Sicily in 1910 when she was six years old.

CASSARINO: That's right.

SIGRIST: Good morning, Mrs. Cassarino.

CASSARINO: Good morning. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Could you please begin by giving me your birth date?

CASSARINO: My birthday? November 4, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What is it, Mrs. Elliot? May I also say that Mrs. Cassarino's

daughter Mrs. Elliott is also in the room with us. What is it?

ELLIOTT: November 16th.

SIGRIST: November 16th?

CASSARINO: Yeah, November 16, 1904.

SIGRIST: Thank you. And where were you born?

CASSARINO: In Belvedere.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CASSARINO: B-E-L-V-E-D-E-R-E. Belvedere.

SIGRIST: And where in Sicily is that?

CASSARINO: Where in Sicily?

SIGRIST: Yes.

CASSARINO: Well, I also lived with my grandmother there in Belvedere.
That's the only place I could remember.

SIGRIST: Where is that in Sicily? Where in the country is that?

CASSARINO: Oh, well, that I don't know. I couldn't remember. I don't
know if it's near Siracusa, where our birth certificates were.
(a tapping sound is heard)

SIGRIST: We're going to pause the . . . (break in tape) Okay. We're resuming the interview with Mrs. Cassarino. What do you remember about this town that you grew up in?

CASSARINO: Of this town?

SIGRIST: Yes.

CASSARINO: Oh, I think it's nice. I also lived in this town.

SIGRIST: What did it look like when you were a little girl?

CASSARINO: Where I was born? It looked like Berlin, (she refers to Berlin, CT) like a county. It wasn't a big, uh, it was a small, it was a small county like Berlin. That's it. And if we wanted to go any place, we had to go to Siracusa. We could walk it. And when my mother was a widow she came to America. She left my sister and I with my grandmother. And . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you remember about living with your grandmother.

CASSARINO: She took good care of us. She took good care of us. And I used to, six years old, you know, in Italy little girls was doing things. Not like here. And my grandmother would tell me to go to the store, get this for me, and I would go to the store. Because my sister was three years old, she couldn't do

anything. But she treated us very good. Then my mother, because she was a widow, she had to . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the house looked like? Can you describe it?

CASSARINO: Oh, the house was like a duplex. My grandmother on one side, then on the other side. That, we had no stoves. We used to have a round to cook everything. Then I remember she used to have an oven. She used to bake her own bread. And all with the twigs, she used to go out to get twigs, warm up the oven, make the bread. The bread would rise, she'd put a platter in the oven, and we'd have nice homemade bread. She never went, they had big, like downtown a lot of people didn't have any of that, so they used to make their bread home. Then a lady would go outside and holler out, "The ovens are ready. Come and bake your bread." And, oh, it used to be delicious bread.

SIGRIST: Did you used to help her bake bread?

CASSARINO: Well, I used to help her a little bit. I used to help a lot of little things, a lot of little things. Then they wanted, little girls, we used to have olive trees, beautiful olive trees in Sicily. And they were looking for little girls to go pick olives, the ones that fell on the ground. And we had little straw baskets. And I'd go over there, pick them up and

fill the little, then we'd take them home to my grandmother. Then they used to have like a horse going around to all the, olives used to go in there and they used to squash them all. And they used to have, the oil used to fall all in there. And then it used to go to another part, they would make it nice and clean and put it in bottles. My grandmother, that olive oil I never tasted in America the olive oil the way I remember in Italy. Anything you cooked.

SIGRIST: How would she use the olive oil?

CASSARINO: Well, she would use it in cooking, salad. And there was hardly any meat to eat, hardly any meat. We lived on fish and a lot of greens. They used to grow a lot of greens, and those greens were delicious. She would boil them, then fry them. Then they had the onions. My grandmother, I think she had a big garden in the back. She picked the onions, cut them up and put them in there. And we used to use a lot of bread. She used to make loaves of bread, round loaves like that.

SIGRIST: How would she make the bread? Can you describe it?

CASSARINO: Flour, add, every time they made the bread they would leave a piece, and that would stay a whole week, like yeast cake. See, here you buy. That would stay a whole week. Then with that bread she would make the other bread because it would rise up.

That's how they all did it, like that.

SIGRIST: So she was always saving a little piece for the next time.

CASSARINO: Yeah, every, yeah. You take a week to get just like yeast cake. Then I had an aunt that lived there in the same, the same city. She used to do this. I used to go down to see her, too. And I have a first cousin who lives in Berlin, that her mother and my father were brother and sister, a first cousin. And we used to go and see her. She used to have babies there, and I used to play with the children and all that. So that's it. Then after a while my mother met somebody nice in America. She came to America to send us money, because she couldn't go out, everybody was coming to America. And so she asked my grandmother, she says, "Ma, will you take care of my children?" She says, "Sure, but don't forget them." She said, "I won't." So she was here about, oh, about three years. She met a nice fellow, a bachelor. She lived with some friends. And she started sending for us in Italy.

SIGRIST: Okay. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here.

CASSARINO: Okay.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

CASSARINO: My mother's name was Sebastiana Marino.

SIGRIST: M-A-R-I-N-O? And what was your father's name?

CASSARINO: My father's name was Salvatore Felice. My maiden name is Felice.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CASSARINO: F-E-L-I-C-E.

SIGRIST: And what happened to your dad?

CASSARINO: He died.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

CASSARINO: Oh, I don't know. He was a tutor. He was a teacher. And he was, he was a cavalleria. They used to wear these capes, as a soldier on the horse. And he got sick somehow. I remember that. Because six years old, I remember. My sister doesn't remember. He was sick about four months. And, of course, my mother had to go out and work and I would take care of him. If he wanted anything, a water or something, he was on the one-room couch there. And all of a sudden he died overnight. I remember that. We were sleeping on the bed, and my other grandmother came over. My mother called. So my father was laying near the wall, and his mother says, "Salvatore is dead." In Italian you say, "Salvatore e morto." So they called right

away, because no, it didn't bother nobody. They called three, two other, two fellows and the two ladies, and they ordered a casket, wood casket. So they came over, they dressed him up while he was still warm. When I looked I could just see him. And they put one sheet under and the other sheet, they would lay him down, and they covered him with a sheet. In the morning a carriage would come by, just a carriage. But we all had to walk to the cemetery. It was a little far, but we all had to walk. And I remember him, burying him. And we came home. So after that . . .

SIGRIST: Can I ask you a question? Do you have any memories of your father when he was alive?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember about your dad?

CASSARINO: Oh, he was so good. When my mother had me first, then after three years my sister. So he used to, over there it was all midwives. So he used to, I was, my sister was younger and I was older. And he used to love to walk us downtown, they called a piazza, down the city. And he would meet people, they would talk. Then he was teaching in the school, but then he got so sick he says, "I can't do it in school." He was

teaching, I think, six fellows from fourteen to eighteen years old. Because I remember them. They used to come over. Then my grandmother would say, "Go over there." So after that he got sick. He couldn't teach any more. So that's what I remember.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met? Do you know how your parents met?

CASSARINO: Oh, my mother used to tell me how they met, because she was young. She got married, I think she was about seventeen years old. I got married, I was sixteen and three months.

SIGRIST: How did they meet?

CASSARINO: Then they, he used to come over. He used to come over, they used to walk around and come over, and I could see he'd come over the house. They would sit, and little by little they, she says, "We got together. I liked him. So we got married."

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a moment. (break in tape)
We're now resuming the interview with Mrs. Cassarino.
Mrs. Cassarino, tell me a little bit about your grandmother.
What was she like as a person?

CASSARINO: Oh, she was a nice woman, very nice.

SIGRIST: What did she look like?

CASSARINO: Oh, she looked almost like my mother. You see my mother up there? There's my mother and my father. See the two girls? (she gestures to photographs)

SIGRIST: Can you describe it in words, what she looked like?

CASSARINO: Oh, I think she'd, I would say she, I know she didn't look like me.

SIGRIST: Was she a big woman?

CASSARINO: No, she was a little woman. She was a small woman.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like?

CASSARINO: Her personality was very good. She was very good. Then she had two sisters. We used to go see them, too. Now, I forgot their name, but she always told them, "Take care of your grandchildren, you." She says, "Their mother's in America. You take care of them." So I'd say, "Andie, she's taking good care of us. She's taking good care of us." "And you take good care of your little sisters." "Oh, yeah." Oh, anywhere I went, she wouldn't leave me go, anywhere I went. Even when we, on the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what clothes, the kind of clothes that you wore

back in Sicily? What did your grandmother wear?

CASSARINO: Oh, my grandmother, just a dress that she has over there.

(gesturing to a photograph)

SIGRIST: Which is what?

CASSARINO: Long dresses, long dresses. And we, those little dresses we got there, I think my mother send us a long time ago. Plain little dresses, nothing fancy.

SIGRIST: Was your grandmother a religious woman?

CASSARINO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about religion in Sicily and how you practiced your religion?

CASSARINO: Oh, we used to walk to the church.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

CASSARINO: What?

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

CASSARINO: Oh, Catholic, always Catholic. And we used to walk to church and my grandmother would say, "We've got to carry our chairs." Because they didn't have any pews like they have now. And it

wasn't too far, so we have small chairs just to sit on. And they all carried their chairs. And we used to wear the beautiful shawls. They used to wear those beautiful shawls over. In fact, I think my mother, when she came to America, she took hers to America. So . . .

SIGRIST: The shawl was something special that you wore to church?

CASSARINO: Beautiful shawls, yes. With the point, nice fringe down.

SIGRIST: How far away was the church?

CASSARINO: Oh, not, like from here down the college, down as you enter.

SIGRIST: So very close.

CASSARINO: Very close. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the church?

CASSARINO: The town was so small. The town, Belvedere was a small town. Siracusa, that was a big town.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the church?

CASSARINO: That I don't remember. That I don't remember.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

CASSARINO: Well, we used to pray a lot. At night we would all sit down

before we went to bed. My grandmother sit down and we'd pray, and then we'd go to bed. And every Sunday, of course, that's the only, we'd go to church. And around Easter time, like this time, they used to have all the little girls, I think three weeks before they used to give us a little pot and dirt then we'd plant some weeds. Then by the time we went there the weeds get that big, (she gestures) and all the little girls in white, we used to go, the night before Easter, sit there, vigil, for the saint. And two hours, three or four little girls take a rest, then the other, I think until midnight. Then after that, of course, we'd go to church. And then we'd take the little, I don't know what they called it, like little asparagus. We'd take the little, the things home after Easter. Very nice. Of course, everybody had boiled eggs like here. No coloring because there was no coloring. Just white boiled eggs. And we'd have some nice Easter, Easter dinner.

SIGRIST: Who would come to Easter dinner? Who would come to have dinner with you on Easter?

CASSARINO: Well, some friends that my grandmother knew they were all alone. Some of them were with us. Of course, she was a widow, too. She was a widow for a long time. I don't even, I don't even think I was born when she lost her husband.

SIGRIST: So you never knew your grandfather.

CASSARINO: That's right. So they used to call friends, maybe one or two, that's all. Because they didn't really have too too much. They didn't have too much, like we have here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other kind of celebrations, holidays, maybe saints' days?

CASSARINO: Holidays they used to take the Saint Anne out. They used to take Saint Anne out, and get it all around. And a lot of them used to break loaves of bread. And when they used to take, some people could afford, they would pin money on it. But the ones that couldn't afford, they would bake bread, and when the saint go back in the church they would sell, they would, uh, take the bread and they would say, "How much is this? How much that?" The highest bidder. They would, that's how they made money, and they used to sell. But people that were a little better off, they had more work, they were younger fellows and their wives, they would pin money on the saint, yeah. That was very nice.

SIGRIST: Was Christmas a big holiday or not?

CASSARINO: Christmas was a big holiday, but Easter wasn't really a holy holy. But Christmas, like, we didn't have gifts like we have

here. We couldn't afford them. But my grandmother, she fooled us. She used to put our shoes near the door and tell us that some saint was coming and put some goodies in. We'd find a few nuts, an apple or something. Nothing like here. We didn't know, when we came here, Christmas so big, my goodness. Nothing. That's all. That's all they left, that's all. They didn't have no money, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did, you were probably too young, you didn't, did you go to school? You probably didn't go to school.

CASSARINO: Oh, we, I went to school.

SIGRIST: You did go to school.

CASSARINO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me about that.

CASSARINO: Well, I went to school, I, my mother was sending us postage money in my name. And I went to school, because I learned pretty good. I could write Italian good. So she went, the postal check used to come. The postman would call my grandmother to say, "Have your daughter come down after school or on a Saturday because she's got to sign her name. Her mother's check is here." She sent the money so my grandmother could feed us. So that's what we did. I would go down, I'd

sign and they would give me the money. That's the way my mother, that's why she came to America. She says, "I don't want to have my kids, I want to go to America and feed them." So she traveled. Another young couple, they were getting married. And that's, they landed those, the two couples, they're dead too, they all lived in New Britain.

SIGRIST: How old were you when your mother went to America?

CASSARINO: How old I was?

SIGRIST: Yes, when she left.

CASSARINO: I was about four years old.

SIGRIST: It was soon after your father died?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes. After my father died, oh, yeah. That's why she came. They were immigrating, a lot of people were coming to America.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother leaving?

CASSARINO: Leaving? Oh, yes. I remember when she left, we cried. We both cried. But, you know, we knew my grandmother would take good care of us. That's all she did. She hugged us and everything until we got used to it.

SIGRIST: What did, what did your mother do when she got here?

CASSARINO: She worked in a factory. She worked in, they called it Corbin's, Corbin's Screw. She worked with knives. She used to work with knives. And then she used to send us a little more money after she start working good.

SIGRIST: What did you know about, I'm sorry, what fun, what did you do for fun in Sicily? When you were a little girl, what games did you play?

CASSARINO: Oh, we'd just play around with the other kids. Then once in a while the Americans come to the cities, and we could hardly understand them. And I remember when they came and my street, what's the name of that street? I don't remember. They all used to come, because it used to be the white house. There used to be a white house. In fact, we used to go up there and play with the owner that rented the white house, around the porch, all around. And the English people used to come, and they used to throw money, and all the little girls come, try and get as much as they could. I remember that. My sister too, she was with me, and I remember the white house. It wasn't too far from where we lived. And you'd just go up a hill and you'd go up the steps. And the lady, the caretaker, she had two children, too. That's why she liked us to go over there. But it would be time, they would tell us to go, because it was time for them to eat or something. Then we'd tell my

grandmother, "Did you have a good time?" "Yeah, we had a nice time. They told us they want us to go up here maybe twice a week." So that's what we did. That was the only thing we did.

SIGRIST: So what did, seeing these Americans, what did you think about America when you were a little girl? What did you know about America?

CASSARINO: Well, I thought, at first I thought it was, but after I went to school, and we started school right away it was . . .

SIGRIST: I mean, when you were in Sicily what did you know about America? Your mother is here?

CASSARINO: We didn't know much. We didn't know, just the way it was. I didn't know much at all. But . . .

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother have a garden?

CASSARINO: Huh?

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother have a garden?

CASSARINO: Oh, yeah. They all had a little back garden.

SIGRIST: What did she grow in her garden?

CASSARINO: Oh, she used to grow, like, peppers. They'd grow fast. And these little squash they'd have here, and a lot of dandelions.

You know, they'd sell a lot of them. Dandelions she used to grow there. They used to, that's about all we ate, and bread.

SIGRIST: You said very little meat.

CASSARINO: Of course, the olive oil. Hardly any meat. It was quite a lot of fish.

SIGRIST: Were you near the, were you near the ocean, near the sea?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes. We used to go swimming.

SIGRIST: Tell me about going to the ocean.

CASSARINO: In fact, I got sick. I was so sick one time. So the doctor, I think, yes. I don't know what the heck I had. I know it was a man doctor. He used to come over the house. He used to give me needles once a week. I don't know what I had. Then he ordered to, take my grandmother, "Take her swimming in the ocean." We could walk it. We didn't have bathing suits. We all had little slippers. And she used to come in, too, with us, my sister and my grandmother. And he says, "Give her two boiled eggs a day." And she used to boil it, and after we'd finish swimming a little bit, he says, "Just half an hour, no longer than that. Let her play around in the water, then bring her back, dry her and dress her." And then I'd eat the eggs. And I got over that sickness. I really got over that sickness.

SIGRIST: But you don't know what it was.

CASSARINO: I don't know just what it was, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your sister's name?

CASSARINO: Carmella.

SIGRIST: And do you remember when your mother was pregnant with her or when she gave birth to her, any of that?

CASSARINO: No, that I don't remember. (a telephone rings)

SIGRIST: We're going to pause the interview just for a moment. (break in tape) We're now resuming with Mrs. Cassarino. Mrs. Cassarino, your mother is in America. She's sending money to your grandmother. When do you find out that she wants you to come over?

CASSARINO: Oh, I think it was two years after she married this fellow.

SIGRIST: How did she meet this man?

CASSARINO: She met this fellow, she was boarding with another couple that they were here a long time, but they knew her. And he came as a boarder, and that's how they got to know each other. So he says, you know, "Let's go out to a movie or something." He says, "You know, I think I'd like to marry you." He never was

married. "You know," she says, "I have two children in Italy."

He says, I also remember, he says, "I don't care if you have four." So they got married, and after, even after a month she started sending letters to my grandmother. "I got married and the man I married is a nice man. He told me that he wants the children over here." Well, the first letter, "Oh, no." She went over to her sister, "What do you think about this? Now that I raised up the kids she wants them." She says, "They're her children. You'd better send them." "No." So she kept sending letters. So finally she got another letter and her sister says, what's her name? Oh, I forgot. "You send the kids because you're going to get in trouble. She wants her children." So she says, "Well, okay." So she went to the post office, because I couldn't write that good and told the fellow, "Tell my daughter that I'm sending the children. I'm going to have them vaccinated. I know they've got to be vaccinated and all that." So my mother got the letter that she was happy.

SIGRIST: What was the man's name that she married?

CASSARINO: Huh?

SIGRIST: What was the man's name that she married?

CASSARINO: Uh, Gaetano, uh. Gaetano, it's a funny name. He's buried in some cemetery.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe it will come to you later.

CASSARINO: Maybe.

SIGRIST: What was he doing for a living?

CASSARINO: He worked at the railroad track. He was working the railroad track. And he really loved us, and we got to know him, and we used to meet, go down to meet him, and he used to have his lunchbox, and he also put some goodies in the lunchbox. He liked us so much he lived, just we knew him, he lived about eight months and he passed away, and my mother was a widow again.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear.

CASSARINO: We just started to know him. So, but she was a widow again.

SIGRIST: When you were in Sicily, did you want to come to America?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes, we did, sure. Because my grandmother was getting old, my mother was much younger. So finally she made up her mind. "Okay. I'm sending you girls over." So she started, then they told her, she says, she went to the, where they make passport and all that, Siracusa. Says, "You've got to start right away. They've got three months." I think we boarded in August. We boarded from Naples in August, 1910. We had a three months.

And the ship's name was the Europa.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took, what your grandmother packed for you?

CASSARINO: Oh, and we had a, and my mother paid, we had a, somebody to take care of us.

SIGRIST: Like a chaperon.

CASSARINO: Chaperon. She paid for his trip, and she paid both ways. So that my, uh, let's see.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you when you left?

CASSARINO: Of course, my mother, uh, my grandmother started getting cookies and little dresses ready that we could change. We couldn't carry too much. And they didn't have any suitcases, pillowcases, pillowcases. So we waited. We got vaccinated all right and we had to go to the doctor. Everything was okay. Then came August 10th. The boat came in from Naples.

SIGRIST: So how did you get from Sicily to Naples?

CASSARINO: Oh, I think via train or something, or somebody took us on a little buggy. Yeah. We got there, and of course my grandmother, she felt so bad seeing us go up there. And he came, a nice young fellow. His name was Salvatore, just like

my father. But he was nice to us for a while. So we got on the boat.

SIGRIST: Wasn't it hard to say goodbye to your grandmother?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes, yes. It was.

SIGRIST: But she went with you to Naples.

CASSARINO: She went till we got on the boat, and then they all, everybody that got there, the parents, the husbands, some husbands and wives, some of them were engaged. But it was a cattle boat. We were there two weeks, two weeks on that boat. And the food was not good at all. Now it's like a floating hotel. Because I know my husband went to Italy to see his sisters. So one of the guys, they would have one fellow go for six people to go where the cooks were to get our food. We used to sit on the floor on the deck. We all sat around and we used to eat, had glasses, spoons, whatever. No plastic stuff there, just like we have here. The bread was that hard, hard bread. But we had to eat it anyways. But some of them, you know, after they would, we went, my sister and I weren't seasick much, very little. So then this guy, one of the ladies would get up. They had baskets and barrels, where to put the food we didn't eat. And one lady would wash the dishes with cold water on the top deck.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

CASSARINO: My sister was little. She used to get baby food, like pastina. She used to get, and when they used to call, I would go over there, and I would get it for her, and I would tell her, "Sit down and eat it." But I didn't get that, because I was a little older. She used to get that.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what it felt like? Were you frightened on the boat, or . . .

CASSARINO: Well, we were frightened, yes.

SIGRIST: This is all very new to you.

CASSARINO: Oh, it's big, yeah. The people walk around and all that. And I had to keep my eyes on my sister because she used to run around a lot, she used to run around. No, they didn't have boats like, they had a fence this way and that way. Well, once I said, "Where is she?" And the other young couple, they were watching us, too. So I looked, and I could see her near the fence. She was looking down. I got so scared. Even the other lady ran with me. I got a hold of her dress and I pulled her down. I says, "You see all the fishes? They're going to eat you." I got so scared. Did I slap her behind! And the lady,

too. "Don't do that no more!" Those were the couple when we used to go downstairs, at that time one place was for men, the other place for ladies. One couple, we used to have a deck. We slept on top, my sister and I. She took, she was engaged to be married. And she, he'd take her down and then he'd go. In the morning, seven o'clock, they'd all come, get their wives, or their lady friend. And this fellow used to pick us up and bring us down. First, I was the first. He used to bring us upstairs with his fiance. They were so good. They're the ones that took care of us, because the sponsor was always in the bar. That's where he lived. And my mother paid for everything. So they took real good care of us. They were talking.

SIGRIST: It's a good thing they were there for you.

CASSARINO: Oh, yeah. The bathroom was terrible. The bathroom, everything was terrible.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you slept in the boat?

CASSARINO: We slept . . .

SIGRIST: What did it look like?

CASSARINO: Well, it looked terrible, those cots up. They had up and down. We were on top, and the other two ladies were on the bottom.

They were both engaged to be married. But one of them was so nice to us. It was dark. It was very dark. Then we had bad ocean. Oh, the boat would just, we were all up on deck right after dinner. And the warden says, "Everybody go down." We all had to run down where we slept, because the water come and wash it down. So, oh, we were there until it was dark. We couldn't walk, we'd walk to go this way and that way. So we all sat, tried to get up and tried to sleep, but nobody could sleep. So finally it settled down, and they all come down. I don't know, they gave us something to eat again. And then we went downstairs and went to sleep.

SIGRIST: So it was pretty unpleasant, for the most part.

CASSARINO: It was terrible, it was terrible.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having any fun on the boat?

CASSARINO: No fun at all. That's all, I was scared. So was my sister, of course, she didn't know too much. I was the one who was scared. They were all scared. There were a lot of people with babies, and it was terrible.

SIGRIST: And it took you two weeks.

CASSARINO: Huh?

SIGRIST: It took you two weeks.

CASSARINO: Two full weeks.

SIGRIST: Two full weeks. And then do you remember coming into New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes. You should hear the people when we saw the Statue of Liberty. Oh, they would see. I would look and oh, they'd cry and kneel down. And they all had a lot of these little bags and little suitcases. A lot of them didn't even, they would forget, they were so in a hurry to get out. So we all got out Ellis Island there. We had to stay there all night. Great, big room. And there was no beds or anything. There were benches, so everybody just there, nobody, they didn't give us anything. A little bit I think hot coffee or milk, whatever. So we're all sitting there, and this big balcony on top. And there was a lot of English people, you know, well-to-do people. And I looked up, and I could all see them looking down to us, all the immigrants. They were all looking down. Finally daybreak came, and they told us to get up. We had to get in line, see who passed and who didn't. So we got in line. I saw a picture that my son gets some magazines. She brought it over, and I saw some pictures, I remember. So we get all in lines, and white, when they looked at the vaccination, if they

couldn't pass they'd put a white cross. When I saw that in front, I said, "Oh, my God, if I don't pass or my sister," they send you back. So when we went my sister got yellow, because I kept her in front of me, and I got the yellow, this side. The ones with the white, that side. Those are the ones that didn't pass. I was so glad, I even cried. "Oh, thank God!" So we had to wait all in line. We had the tags. And I could see people come in out of a little door, like the small door that goes to my kitchen. And when I saw my mother, my step-father come in, I couldn't, she looked so different. She had her hair up, and she was dressed so nice. And her husband, he was a tall fellow. He was nice and tall. My father, he was tall, too. So they came over. She hugged us and everything. So we went over. We had to wait for the train. It took, I think it was about from eleven or twelve o'clock in the morning until late at night we got to New Britain. And when we were on the train, of course, our hair was all snarled, I couldn't comb it, our clothes. So I remember my mother trying to comb my hair. She did what she could. So she had a neighbor, she lived on Beaver Street in New Britain. That building is down now. I'll never forget it. She had neighbors. They were living across. They had made supper and everything. She says, "I don't care what time they come, we got to be ready for them." And her apartment was all fixed. She had bed for us, she had

nightgowns. So we got there, and we all sat. The first thing she did, she put us in the tub. She gave us a bath, the two of us. Clean clothes, she washed our hair. She was looking, probably we had fleas or something. But no, thank goodness we were clean. So she combed our hair. We went to, I could remember in the morning she said, "Come." She says, "I couldn't wake you up." I says, "Ma, we hardly slept over there. I had to take care of Carmella because she was all." She had the little cot near her, but she wouldn't sleep there.

I had to squeeze her in with me, she was so afraid. So we got there all right. So in the morning, "We got to take the children out to buy clothes," because it was the winter time. We got here in January, I think. Well, it was getting winter.

So I remember on Lafayette Street in New Britain there was two Jewish girls that had nice clothes. So they bought us winter coats, boots, dresses, everything. "Now," she says, "The children are ready to go to school." And there was a little schoolhouse on Elm Street that's gone. That's where we went. And I started speaking English much quicker than my sister.

SIGRIST: How did you learn?

CASSARINO: In school, yeah. I started talking English very fast. My sister was a little harder. She was a little harder with everything. So . . .

SIGRIST: Are there any stories that you remember about learning English or saying a word incorrectly or anything like that?

CASSARINO: Sometimes, then the teacher would say, "No, you've got to say it this way." Then I started, they'd show you how to write and read. Yet I started pretty good. My sister was much slower. So we were at recess. We used to go out at recess. And it happened to be slippery, the snow. Well, I didn't have the bad leg, so I was the first one. They all went on me, the whole bunch of kids went on me. This leg went down like this, and I broke the knee here. So at that time they put me, when they called my mother, she didn't know what to do. She called the doctor, and they had to put me in a cast. For six months they didn't touch that cast. So it felt like I had a, some kind of knee that they couldn't do anything for me. So that's it. So what did we do after that?

SIGRIST: Did they make fun of you because you had a cast? Did you go to school, or did you have to stay home?

CASSARINO: No, I had to stay home. I couldn't walk. I had to stay home. Oh, and I went to the Children's Hospital in Newington because I couldn't take care, nobody could take care of me. They couldn't lift me up. I would holler. They put me in bed. And they had like a hoop over the sheet so that wouldn't touch my

leg, because I'd hurt all the time, even with the cast.

SIGRIST: That must have been terrible for a little girl!

CASSARINO: Oh, it hurt for six months. Then finally they took it, but they couldn't do anything. They couldn't do anything. They weren't doctors like there are now. So I was in Newington Children's Home, for about a year-and-a-half, yeah. Then I was, I went to school. I was about twelve, twelve years old.

SIGRIST: You were in the Newington Children's Hospital for a year-and-a-half.

CASSARINO: Yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Why? Why did they leave you in the hospital for all that time?

CASSARINO: Because my, my knee. They wanted to check it once in a while.

SIGRIST: So you actually had to live there.

CASSARINO: Oh, yeah, live there. They used to, it was like an open air. It was a big hall. It was nice. And I could go, the ones that could walk could go to the kitchen. But they used to bring my food in a tray. Then I start walking with the cast a little bit, holding on the bars. But I used to drag my foot, I used to drag my foot. So finally they told me I could go home.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and your step-father come to visit you, or?

CASSARINO: They used to come to visit me. Oh, yeah. They used to bring me a lot of goodies and all that. So they asked, "Can we take her home?" She says, "Not yet." She says, "We'll let you know when you could take. When she could get up and walk around a little bit, then you take her home and have your own doctor."

SIGRIST: So this all happened just a few months after you got here, right?

CASSARINO: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Soon after you got here.

CASSARINO: Yes!

SIGRIST: I mean, this is terrible for a little girl.

CASSARINO: I know it was. I know, it was terrible. I didn't have a good life at all when I was young.

SIGRIST: Did you miss your grandmother?

CASSARINO: Huh?

SIGRIST: Did you miss your grandmother when you got here?

CASSARINO: When I came here, no. We didn't miss it no more. I tell my

sister, Carmella, "You want to go back to Siracusa?" "No! I want to stay with Mama over here now. I don't want to go over there."

SIGRIST: Tell me about, you said your mother looked so different to you when you saw her at Ellis Island for the first time . . .

CASSARINO: Well, she looked older, she looked older.

SIGRIST: Was her personality different than how you had remembered it?

CASSARINO: No. She was just as nice as, no, her personality was the same. She was so happy to have us here, very happy.

SIGRIST: Tell me about when your stepfather died, because that's what, nine months after or eight months after you got here.

CASSARINO: My stepfather died I think about six months after.

SIGRIST: Six months after. Tell me about what you remember about that happening.

CASSARINO: He was a nice fellow. He was a very nice fellow. He's buried down in the cemetery here, way down.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

CASSARINO: Oh, I don't know if he had, I think he caught cold doing those train tracks, those logs they put. He used to work, even when

it was raining they used to have those for the train to go by.
They had to go, rain or not. I think he had gotten pneumonia.
In a few days he was gone. In a few days he was gone.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about when he died? And were you living
at home, or were you in the hospital?

CASSARINO: Just, no. I think he died home. He was not in the hospital.

SIGRIST: No, were you at home or were you in the . . .

CASSARINO: We were home, oh, yeah. We were home.

SIGRIST: You were home.

CASSARINO: Yes, we were home when he died. He died during at night time.
Yes, he died during night time. And at that time, did they
have embalmers? I don't think so either. They had the
undertaker. They would take him, but he died in the morning,
in the afternoon they take him down the cemetery.

SIGRIST: Tell me how your mother reacted to all this?

CASSARINO: Well, she was sad. That's all she did was cry. She says, "I
met such a nice fellow. I lost one in Italy, and now I get my
children over here. He was such a nice guy." He wanted us,
because she was thinking when she asked him, "I got two
children," he says, "I don't care if you have four." He was so

good, she had to lose him.

SIGRIST: So what happened after he died? How did your mother support . . .

CASSARINO: Well, she went to work. She worked at the factory.

SIGRIST: Right. But was that bringing in enough money to support . . .

CASSARINO: Huh?

SIGRIST: Was that bringing in enough money?

CASSARINO: Oh, yeah. It was pretty good, because things weren't that bad at that time. She, she fed us all right. I think we lived on Elm Street, the first floor, yeah. We lived on Elm Street.

SIGRIST: You said your sister had a hard time learning English. Tell me a little bit about how she adjusted to America.

CASSARINO: Well, she adjusted pretty good. It took a little longer, and, but she finally came around. She finally came around. Oh, yes. She learned how to read. She didn't want to write too much. And after she married a Spanish fellow. And that's how I could tell, a lot of girls, Italian girls, marry Spanish fellows. They could talk Spanish. But my sister could never learn, a few words. She was hard in everything. God rest her soul. I lost her about fifteen years ago. The only sister I

had.

SIGRIST: Did your mother, after her husband died, did she want to go back to Sicily?

CASSARINO: No. She hated it just like I hate it. I don't like it. I remember what Italy is. Maybe now they say it's okay. Because my husband went back to see his sisters. My husband came from Canicattini Bagni. And he had two sisters there. And he wrote a letter. One sister said, "If you want to see your sister, you'd better come, because she's not good at all." So he went to see her. And it's a good thing, he took her to doctors and all that but they couldn't help her. So he had a visa to come back to America, and he came, he was on the ship and he got a telegram his sister had passed away, which, when he got home he says, "It's a good thing I came." So that's it. Then a year after, two years, his other sister died, so there's nobody in Sicily that I know of. I had an aunt there. She's gone. Everybody's gone.

SIGRIST: Did you have to go to work when you were fairly young?

CASSARINO: I went to work when I went to school. I was, at that time, fourteen years old, I went to work to Corbin's Screw school for a while. They used to say, just during vacation time. I used to sort out some kind of nails or screws or whatever. But

after that I didn't like it any more. So I didn't want to go to school any more. So my mother had some boarders, so she said, "I got some nice boarders that want to come." She had a house up and down like this. So she says, "I'm going to work and you can stay here. You know, you can take care of the house." Because I was sixteen years old then. I could cook. I even washed. So she went to work, and the boarder, one of the boarders happened to be, he was a mason. And he used to come, my mother, they used to pay every week. There was two of them. So I used to stay home and cook for them. Then my mother would come home about five o'clock. She would find supper ready, too. So she says, "Were the boarders all right?"

"Yes," I said. "Ma, they didn't bother me." So one of them was young. He was single. The other one was married, but he told me he had a wife in Italy. So this young one started to like me. So he said, "Gee," he says, "I don't know." Oh, it was raining one day, and he was a mason. He used to carry bricks, the bricklayers. So when it rained he couldn't work. So he came home. And I said, "How come?" "Well, it's raining, and I can't work." She says, "I made dinner for you." "No," he says, "I had a sandwich that I take." So okay. The following day, I don't know, a day after, it starts pouring again. So he says, "You want to come to the movies?" I said, "I can't go to the movies with you. My mother will holler."

"Oh, we'll go." "No," I said, "No, I don't do anything without my mother." So my mother comes home, and he starts talking. He says, "You know, I want to marry your daughter." She says, "My daughter's too young yet." He says, "I don't care. I want to marry her." So okay. We were engaged from November. So one day he comes, he says, "Oh, come on. Now we're engaged, I could take you to the movies." I says, "I didn't tell my mother." "Oh, that's all right. We'll be back before your mother comes home." Well, that movie ended early, later. No, early. So we came home, and there was a neighbor, she had a grocery store. My mother used to go by there and buy something. So she told my mother, "Oh, I see your daughter's got a boyfriend." She says, "I saw them go down to the movies, then they came back." Did I get hell from her, and he did, too. "Hey, you're not married yet. You don't take my daughter till you go to the City Hall." Oh, he felt so cheap that time. He says, "Okay." Finally he says, "I want to marry your daughter." Oh, okay. So she had to sign. I was only sixteen and three months. He was twenty years old, a little older than me. But you never noticed, he looked so young. So we went down to City Hall. Waited for three weeks to get the blood examined and all. So one night it was kind of cold and she had no heat then, that big belly stove upstairs. So we went upstairs with my sister, then he came upstairs. So then my

sister went down, so he started just putting his arms around me. Who comes up? My mother. "Hey, you're not married yet. Downstairs." Oh, he felt bad. "When you're married, that's it." So January 22nd.

SIGRIST: What year?

CASSARINO: Oh, gosh. I was married fifty years to him. January 22nd he had, my daughter gave us a party at her house, fifty years.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you got married?

CASSARINO: Sixteen and three months.

SIGRIST: So let's see. Your birthday is in . . .

CASSARINO: November 16th.

SIGRIST: November of 1904. So in November of 1920 you turned sixteen, so this must be in January of 1921.

CASSARINO: Yeah, that's right, that's right.

SIGRIST: What was your husband's name?

CASSARINO: Gatano.

SIGRIST: And his last name?

CASSARINO: Yeah. Gatano Cassarino. Yeah. G-A-T-A-N-O.

SIGRIST: And you said he had come from Sicily also.

CASSARINO: He came from Sicily, Canicattini.

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have?

CASSARINO: I have six.

SIGRIST: Can you name them?

CASSARINO: I have six. I have four boys, Paul, Frank, Salvatore and Karl.
And I have two girls, Sebastiana Subwindsor and Concetta.
They call her "Connie," Concetta.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a couple of final questions. One is, and I think you've answered this already. Was your mother happy that she made the decision to come to this country?

CASSARINO: Oh, yes. Oh, she was very happy. She was very happy, because another letter she wrote, she says to her husband, she was telling me that after we were here. She says, "You know, if your grandmother didn't sent me, he told me he was going to come with me and come to Italy to get yous."

SIGRIST: She was determined.

CASSARINO: She was determined to have us over there, because she didn't want to have, she had a bad life in Sicily. She says, "I don't

want to go." And when my husband was living, I was working. I worked when my two boys went into the service. I'm lucky I got two boys. One, my oldest boy is Paul. They were here last night. His wife lives in Windsor. He's seventy-one. He was in the Eighth Air Force during the war, very bad. And I used to get letters. Of course, they used to erase a lot of things off. And I used to, Norton Judd, I worked the Norton Judd, the war department making buckles, duffle bags. I used to put all the buckles there.

SIGRIST: During World War Two.

CASSARINO: Oh yes, yes. So when I went home from dinner my two girls would come home from high school. I used to go home from lunch. Here comes the fellow with a telegram. So they wouldn't leave the telegram if the girls weren't there. So one of my boys was wounded. Salvatore, the one who lives in Florida now. He's sixty-seven. So he says, he's wounded, not bad. When you see two stars or three, that's it. So he read it and gave it back. Okay. Then my other, the oldest boy, one of his planes, it was so foggy they were lost. Because when, after he wrote me a letter he says, "We couldn't see anything. We said we're in a milk run." He says, "We couldn't see." He was a navigator. He says, "We all had to hide under, because we thought we were going to ram. They were going to kill us.

We had to all hide under. We didn't know where it was." After it started clearing, they got up, they were safe. So I had two close calls. This one here was wounded twice (gesturing to a photograph). He lost a heel, and he's still got shrapnel in his back, the one who lives in Florida. He couldn't take the cold weather any more. He has a little pension but the pension goes down. When they start working the pension goes down. The shrapnel is still here, but they said, "We cannot touch you, Salvatore, because the acid in the blood moves." But they fixed his heel. They, I don't know what they did to it. My son, when he was, he was a lieutenant, he went to see his brother when he was wounded. Where the heck was he? So they treated him. Of course, he was a lieutenant and all that. They gave him a nice, he was with his brother three days. And he wrote in a letter. He says, "He's okay. All he's doing is hopping out of bed." And the nurses started hollering at him, "Salvatore, go back to bed." He says, "He's okay, Ma. Don't worry about him." So that's, I'm glad they all came. If I was a gold star mother, every time on Memorial Day I don't even go down the park, but they have a park for all the gold star mothers, I was glad. My youngest boy, Karl, the one that's in Colchester, he went volunteer, but he learned a lot. It wasn't war, but he learned a lot.

SIGRIST: I see. Mrs. Cassarino, we need to end now . . .

CASSARINO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Because we're out of time.

CASSARINO: Oh, yeah. I guess so.

SIGRIST: But I want to thank you very much for letting me come out here.

CASSARINO: Oh, yes. I tried to remember everything.

SIGRIST: You're great. You remember an awful lot.

CASSARINO: Yeah. But when I told the other fellow, I don't know if it was you that talked to me, I told you I was eighty-eight years old. You interviewed one that was about a hundred. I have a woman, a friend of mine, a co-worker. She's ninety, she's going to be ninety-four years old. She worked with me at Norton Judd. At that time they wanted workers. And when the boss says, "Come on, you got a friend?" I told her, I said, "Mary, you want to work? Come over Norton Judd. They'll give you a job." So that's it, okay.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off.

CASSARINO: Yes.

SIGRIST: In New Britain, Connecticut, with Vincenza Cassarino on

EI-273/CASSARINO

Tuesday, March 30, 1993. Thank you.

CASSARINO: Good.