

EI-471

JOHN FIERAMOSCA

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INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 4, 1994

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 2;2010

SICILY, 1924

AGE 13

PASSAGE ON THE: *PADRE*

PORT OF EMBARKATION NOT GIVEN

RESIDENCES: RAGUSA; ELIZABETH, NJ

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Fieramosca is the brother of Mary Mancini, Interview EI-470. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/7/1996.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's May 4th, 1994, and I'm here today in Colt's Neck, New Jersey with John Fieramosca, who came from Sicily when he was thirteen years old in 1924. And I have just interviewed his sister, Mary Fieramosca Mancini. And I just want to say that I'm very happy to get to talk to you, and to see your beautiful farm here.

FIERAMOSCA: Thank you.

LEVINE: And I'm looking forward to hearing your account,

your first hand account.

FIERAMOSCA: When I first came to town?

LEVINE: No. I want to hear, first if you just say for the tape your birth date and the town you were born in.

FIERAMOSCA: Oh. I was born in Ragusa, Italy in 1911, November 17.

LEVINE: And you lived in Ragusa up until you came to America?

FIERAMOSCA: I lived in Ragusa till we came to United States.

LEVINE: What do you remember about Ragusa? When you think of it what is it that you remember most?

FIERAMOSCA: I remember everything. I remember growing up. I, I remember growing up. In the summertime we used to go to my uncle's farm for a couple months. Then we're back to town.

LEVINE: What was your uncle's farm like?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, the farm, it was, it was good, big farm.

LEVINE: What kind of farming?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, they had cows, horses, which I, I used to love them. And they also, they bred a lot of horses. So that's what I'm doing now.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was your uncle's name?

FIERAMOSCA: Giovanni.

LEVINE: And was it Fieramosca?

FIERAMOSCA: No, he was my mother's brother.

LEVINE: Oh.

FIERAMOSCA: And...

LEVINE: Do you remember doing things with your uncle...

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: ...when you were on the farm?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah, I...

LEVINE: What do you remember about what you did together?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, well, I remember taking the horses out to water. The cows. Helping the farm, help breeding a little bit, because I was too young to handle the stallions, that I used to just watch and maybe do, do small things, you know.

LEVINE: What were his horses being bred for?

FIERAMOSCA: Work horses and saddle horses. Carriage horses. That's what they were bred for. No, no thoroughbreds. Regular saddle horses.

LEVINE: Did you ever ride when you were a boy...

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, I used to ride. I, I rode a little bit in Italy, but I rode a lot here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: I rode in the rodeo many times here.

LEVINE: Do you remember your first experiences riding in Italy?

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, yeah. I remember bare back riding with an (unintelligible) saddle. With an (unintelligible) saddle. Ride all over the farm. And then in the, in the fall we used to come into town. And I used to like to work in the, I work in the shop where we would make carriages. Horse carriage, wagons for horses. And I learned quite a bit. At my age I was almost complete mechanic. You know, I could, I could have made a wagon by myself. At my age I was, because I worked in the shop, the, the boss was a real good man, and he was a real smart man.

LEVINE: Do you remember his name?

FIERAMOSCA: Yes. How do you say in English? He had a peculiar name. Ristiano.

LEVINE: Christiano [sic]?

FIERAMOSCA: Ristiano...

LEVINE: Rist-...

FIERAMOSCA: ...or Ristiana. I don't know really, I couldn't spell it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. That was his first name?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: And last name was, geez, when I, I think of him all the time.

LEVINE: What, what, what experiences do you remember with him when you were apprenticing or when you were learning how to, how to make carriages...

FIERAMOSCA: The experience I had with him, he used to buy trees on the farms. And then we used to cut the trees and

bring the lumber to town. Sometime I go away with him for a week. And we used to cut a lot of trees, and then we cut them to sections, you know, and then the wagons he used to bring into town. And he used to take me all the time.

LEVINE: Were there other apprentices learning there?

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, there was, there was two schedules of apprentices. There was the young kids like me, then there were boys eighteen, nineteen years old. They were already complete mechanics. And then we came here.

LEVINE: Well tell me more about, when you went away like for a week and you went and got, cut down the trees, is there anything more about that that you remember, those trips?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I remember that, of course, when we used to go to those farms we used to sleep on the ground and put a lot of straw in there, and they, they had no beds, you know.

LEVINE: Was it cold?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, Sicily doesn't get cold. Maybe it'd get cold like today. Sicily don't get too cold. And we used to do that in the summertime. And then couple times a week, I used to take, they had a little wagon, and I used to go into town, which it took me about an hour and a half to buy supplies and food for the week. You know, buy bread and meat, wine. You can't have anything to eat without a little wine.

LEVINE: So what, would you cook outside?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah, we used to cook, outside or into the house, you know. Farm house. Of course, farm house, they're not like here. But over here the farm houses were not too good either years ago. (he laughs) It was about the same here that it was there, you know, at that time, you know.

LEVINE: Was that always a treat for you to go on those trips?

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, yeah, I used to like that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: I used to like that. I loved it. We used to do that every year. And then sometime it, when we cut the trees, I used to go all the way up in the tree with a rope and tie in on top of the tree so we could make the tree fall the way we want it, you know. And I was the kid to go up there and pull it.
(he laughs) I really enjoyed it.

LEVINE: I would imagine that, that the man who was making the carriages, that he made a big impression on you as a little boy.

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, yeah. I, I, I still think he was one of the greatest man [sic] I ever met.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: And every, I, I went back to Italy 1952. And I stayed there two months. And when I used to go to Italy I used to take my car with me. And I used to go look for him all the time. And the first time I

was walking on the street what I was living when I was a kid with my sister and my nephews. And all of a sudden I look, turn around, and walking behind me was him with his, with his wife and coup-, and his daughters. And I recognized him. He was a real handsome man. Tall. He had a little mustache. He was real...

LEVINE: Did he recognize you?

FIERAMOSCA: No, I was too little.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: Then I was already forty-five, whatever, you know. Forty. But I recognized him. And I told him who I was. But he knew who I was, because he knew that I was coming. And when he saw me walking with my sister and my nephew, he knew that was me. You know, they could tell the way we dress. We dress different, you know. And every time I used to go back to Italy, af-, after while I skipped going to Italy for about ten years. Then I started going every year, you know. And I used to go look for

him. Then I find out that he died, but he must have been pretty old when he died. But he was nice. He was a good man. There were about five, six brothers, you know. And he was the one that I like the best.

LEVINE: They were all in the carriage making business?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, some of them had their own shop. Three of the brothers work with him. One of the brothers came to America, and he used to live in New York. One time I went looking for him and I find him, you know. That was, that was something. A lot of things that I also remember was that my father managed a real big estate in Italy. As a matter of fact they had a tile. Real big one. The houses, the palace. It was a palace. It was a, it had a hundred twenty-five rooms. And when I used to visit him I used to go back there and see the place. And I got to know the caretake [sic] because all the family is died, you know, and, and the place is still there. And I told who I was, and he, he used to take me all through the whole house, you know.

LEVINE: Did you remember it from when you were a little boy?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, we lived there till I was four years old.
Till my father come here, we lived there.

LEVINE: So do you, did, can you remember...

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: ...from when you four.

FIERAMOSCA: I remember when I was three things.

LEVINE: Really?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah, I remember things when I was a little kid.

LEVINE: Wow. What do you remember about the palace from
when you were little?

FIERAMOSCA: I remember that, (he pauses) this guy going to visit
I'm going to get rid of him quick. (pause) This
place, it had a, I don't know how you call it in
English. It was about...

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to stop here for a minute.

FIERAMOSCA: Oh. (break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming now after an interruption. Go ahead.

FIERAMOSCA: They had a, they had a villa.

LEVINE: A beetle [sic]?

FIERAMOSCA: A villa.

LEVINE: A villa. Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: You know, a park.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: And it was a, this place was so big that they had a railroad station right on the premises. They had a police station in there, and they had a, even a church inside the palace. And they used to have a

place, it was about two hundred feet square. And you go in there, and you get lost. Can't find your way out. How you call that?

LEVINE: You mean like a plaza, or a court yard?

FIERAMOSCA: No, it was a place that was closed in. And we had it all zig-zag. And you go in there and you get lost. You...

LEVINE: Oh, like a maze.

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah, you can't find your way out. And the only one that could remember was my sister. My big sister that's in Italy. She used to laugh a little while, then she come and got us.

LEVINE: Well, what, what was it? Was this, was this maze something that was there for a reason?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, this villa, it was a beautiful villa. They had a lot of beautiful things in there. Tours, the train, it used to stop, and the tours used to go there and, and visit, you know.

LEVINE: Was there, was there a royal couple or family there?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I think that one of the, I think the wife was royalty. I, I really don't remember. Of course, you know, I was, when we left there I was about three and a half years old. And every year that I go back there, I haven't been back there in about six years because I, I can't leave the place right now. Every time I go back I go there. I go there. As a matter of fact, the caretaker, his wife used to cook a dinner for me. The place is so beautiful, it's so big, if you go on the, on the roof you could see Malta. You know, Malta? The island Malta? It's about, about three miles, you know, all, you know, the ocean separates. It was a real beautiful place. The only thing that happened, I guess they, they sold all the ground, and they just kept the palace and about maybe ten or twenty acres. Now I understand that they sold that to the state, you know. Of course, it was real beautiful.

LEVINE: Tell me about the maze again. What, what was it made of, and what...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, the, the wall all the way around, it was made out of stone. You know. Then inside it was all big, thick, thick bushes. And you could go in and out all zig-zag and you never could find your way. But, see, the reason why my father came here, the owners of the place, they went to Messina. Messina is a big city in Sicily. And when they went to Messina, well, they had an earthquake and both die. The whole city collapsed, you know, like they had in California. And when they die, then, this guy had four daughters. They took over the place. And they didn't want to run the place they way it should, because my father was there all his life. Managed the place. And he quit the job and he come to America. The best thing he ever did. And, I'm glad that he decided to come here. There's no country like here.

LEVINE: Well, were you, I guess you were the man of the family once he was here in America because it was...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I wasn't a man. I was a kid when he left. I was like four years old, five, four and a half. And

then I was thirteen when I came here.

LEVINE: Did you go to school there?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah, I went to school. I was never too good in school. I always had in my mind to go to work or do something. I never was good in school. Because over here, when I went to school here they put me in a class with a bunch of little kids. That was one mistake that they made. They should have put me with kids almost my age, you know. Because I had a little schooling in Italy, and if they would have put me with kids my age, maybe I would have more ambition to learn something. And I real-, I didn't learn anything in school. All I want to do is quit and go to work. And that's what I did.

LEVINE: So tell me, what did you do for enjoyment. What was your biggest enjoyment when you were still in Sicily as a child?

FIERAMOSCA: The biggest enjoyment was when we would go to the farm in the summertime. Because my, my uncle had two sons, little bit younger than I am. And he had

a couple daughters. And we lived on the farm. We worked there. It was good. It was good there. There was a lot of fruit there. All kind of pears, peaches, figs. You know what figs are? They have figs this big. (he indicates) I...

LEVINE: Maybe that's where you learned how to like work so much?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, so, how about religion? Was your family religious...

FIERAMOSCA: Very religious. Very religious. One of my mother's uncles was, uncle, something, he was a bishop. Very religious family.

LEVINE: What do you remember about observing religion in Sicily?

FIERAMOSCA: All I could remember I used to go to church every Sunday. And then they, they used to have a holiday, like the hol-, the big saint in my time was Saint

John. San Giovanni. And they'd take him out once a year. And they go around the town. And there would be so many people that you just couldn't move. And it used to take about thirty people to carry the saint. Did you ever seen a saint like that?

LEVINE: Yeah, I've seen it in Little Italy, they do that.

FIERAMOSCA: That's it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: Well, this saint is big.

LEVINE: Uh-huh..

FIERAMOSCA: And they have like fifteen men on each side, and they carry it on the shoulders, and they go around the town, and then people hang money there. Then they have maybe two thousand people with candles. Candles ten feet long, that thick, go you know. (he indicates) And then they had young kids like my age dress up with reds. You know, like altar boys. Maybe couple a hundred them. And they had this,

this would last for a long time. That's when everybody got a new suit for that holiday. (he laughs) It was good.

LEVINE: So what was your mother and father's names?

FIERAMOSCA: My mother's name was Giovanna.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

FIERAMOSCA: Licitra.

LEVINE: Do you want to spell it?

FIERAMOSCA: Licitra. I could write it down better than I could spell it.

LEVINE: Okay, we'll write it when we're finished then.

FIERAMOSCA: Okay.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

FIERAMOSCA: Santo. Santo Fieramosca. That's my middle name.

LEVINE: Santo?

FIERAMOSCA: Santo.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember your, any of your grandparents? Any...

FIERAMOSCA: Only my mother's mother and my father's mother.

LEVINE: What do you remember about them?

FIERAMOSCA: I remember my grandmother, my father's mother, she was very, very good to me.

LEVINE: In what way?

FIERAMOSCA: In all ways. Every time we used to go visit her, she used to give me things. Like we used to make bread. Make bread on the side, and you make enough bread for the week. And my grandmother lived on the other end of the town. And me and one of my sisters, we used to bring bread every week to her. And then sometimes she'd come out to see us, but she

was old. But she really was good to me. My grandmother my mother's side, had to get along with her.

LEVINE: What was she like? What was her temperament?

FIERAMOSCA: She liked my other two cousins better because they were her son's sons. And then I had another two cousins, they were her daughter's sons. She liked them better, see.

LEVINE: Well, describe what you were like as a, as a kid in Italy. What, how would you describe yourself?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I always wanted to work, and I was no fool, you know. And I used to like to go to the movie, movie all the time.

LEVINE: What, what was the movie like there then?

FIERAMOSCA: Same as here. Piano played, you know.

LEVINE: Silent movies?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah, silent movies. I used to go the opera a lot. Not because I, I didn't know too much about opera, but I got to learn. See, my brother-in-law that married my big sister that she's still in Italy living, he was a chief of police. And all the police around the town, they all knew me. So when I used to go to the theatre, there used to be a policeman in the front there, you know. When I walked by there and I wanted to go in they'd say, "Oh, this is Carmello's brother-in-law." And I used to go in the, to the movie every night if I want to. I used to go to the opera and never pay for it. Another thing that I liked better, that they, they used to let me go in the back stage, you know, to see the opera. I seen a lot of opera. I don't remember their names. I saw "Madama," "Madama Butterfly." So many I saw. I can't remember. And then we came here.

LEVINE: Okay, well, before you came here do you remember what you knew about America before you actually got here. Do you remember what you thought or expected?

FIERAMOSCA: No, I didn't know anything about it. The only thing

I knew, we were coming here.

LEVINE: And you remember the boat you came on?

FIERAMOSCA: The worst boat I ever seen in my life. (he laughs)
The boat, it must have been then a hundred years
old. The same boat that my father came.

LEVINE: Oh.

FIERAMOSCA: We had a cabin, though. We had two cabins. You,
you're familiar with boats? Well, the boats now,
they got decks, you know. And they got cabins on
each deck. Well, the boat then was one big open
space, and you could look all the way down to the
boiler room, and all the way around the wall they
had the cabins, you know. Not like now, nice. And
I was seasick for seventeen days.

LEVINE: Is that how long the trip was?

FIERAMOSCA: Seventeen days. That's how my mother got sick.
See, we had to stay over there ten days.

LEVINE: Well, tell me what happened with your mother aboard the ship.

FIERAMOSCA: Well, she got sick, you know, from throwing up. You know were rough. Man, I'll never forget that trip. Water used to come over the boat all to the other side, you know. I was glad I was, then everybody said, "Well, when we're going to reach to America, we going to get there in the dark, and you want to see the Statue of Liberty." And everybody stood up that night to see the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Did you know what that was?

FIERAMOSCA: I didn't know what that was. They just, go to see the Statue of Liberty. I didn't know what the meaning of it was.

LEVINE: So did you see it when you came into the Harbor?

FIERAMOSCA: You would see just a light, because it was in the dark. There's lights all the way around, you know.

LEVINE: So tell about your experience, what happened with

your mother and with you and your sister.

FIERAMOSCA: Well, that's a little bit bad part.

LEVINE: Yeah. Don't spare us.

FIERAMOSCA: Huh?

LEVINE: I said don't spare us the bad part.

FIERAMOSCA: Well, when you get off the boat they put you in the tug boat and they take you to the island. When you get to the island and you walk in and then they put you in line, you know. Like a bunch of sheeps [sic]. And you walk in line like, my mother in front, my sisters. I don't remember how it was, but anyway, as you walk they put tickets on you. The ticket means what, where you're going, you know. But just when we got towards the front, and they got it like a court room, you know, they got, and the judge sitting on the other side, my father was on the other side. And I remember him from when I was a kid. That's the bad part. So when I see my father I run to go see him, and the guard grabbed me

by the neck and threw me on the other side. Now if that was now I would have thought what am I going to do, steal a million dollars? You know, I got excited. I saw my father. The guy grabbed me, "Stay in line," he says. (he gestures) (he laughs) And then they put the tickets on us, all of a sudden we're separated. They took my sisters one place, they took my mother to the hospital, and they took me to another place. We don't see each other. We don't know where we are. You don't think I could say it was real beautiful. The rooms were absolutely clean. The food was fair, you know. Get clean sheets every night. It was beautiful. But you don't see your mother. Young kid out of the country. You don't see your sisters. Every morning about eight or nine o'clock we used to go out to walk, and they had a big, big field there with that iron fence all around. You couldn't run away because you had to jump the fence, you'd go in the water. (he laughs) And every morning we'd come out from here, and we used to, I, everybody used to walk the same way, like this. (he indicates) This is for about five, six days, you know. So one day, when I come out for a walk I didn't come around this

way life everybody does. This day I'm going to go this way.

LEVINE: Did you have something in mind?

FIERAMOSCA: No, I just did that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: When I did that, when I got here I run into my sisters. And I says, "Where's Mom," you know. "We haven't seen Mom." Well, anyway we saw each other, at least we knew we were all right. So when I went back to the hall, you know, where we were hanging around, there was a man that knew how to speak Italian and who knew a little English. Very little English. I said to him, "How do you say, 'I want to see my sister and my mother?'" And he told me. Well, you want to see a kid holler, 'I want to see my mother and my sisters.' "I want to see my mother, I want to see my sisters." Within twenty minutes we were united. They come and got us, together they took us to my mother. And my mother was laying bed, sick. (he is moved) That, I tell

you.

LEVINE: So how...

FIERAMOSCA: But in general it wasn't bad. You know. It wasn't bad. Because, you see all different kind of people, you see Turks, black people, I never see black people in my life. There's no black people in Italy. Now they have a lot. You see Chinese, Japanese, Turks with that thing around their head. You know, it was a new experience for me. I never seen those kind of people. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: And then we come home. Thank God.

LEVINE: What was the reunion like, when your mother was better and your father came for you?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, when my mother got better, then they, my father came and got us. You see, that's the thing, that something happened. Because we were American citizen, the kids. Not my mother. We were American

citizen. When my father got the letter that we were going to arrive a certain day, he didn't get the letter till the following day. If he would have got there on time we would have come right home.

aEVINE: Oh.

FIERAMOSCA: You know. Even that, even so, we coulda come home, my sister and I. But my mother, no.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

FIERAMOSCA: But my mother, no, because she had to get better. Why could, them days they had to do that, because you didn't know if you would bring in diseases to the country. They, like now, now you could find anything out quick, you know. Then we come home. And I tell you I didn't like it over here.

LEVINE: Why not?

FIERAMOSCA: Well, first of all we lived in a wooden house in Elizabeth. There's no wooden houses in Italy. (he laughs) (unintelligible) "what is this, chicken coops?" Took me about, then I didn't speak English. Other kids would make fool out of you, you know. But after one year I get, I, I like it.

LEVINE: What, do you, do you know what helped you to learn English?

FIERAMOSCA: Just working and talk to people.

LEVINE: Do you know when the turning point came when you started to like it here?

FIERAMOSCA: About, about a year. About a year.

LEVINE: Was it the language that, that made the difference...

FIERAMOSCA: No, I just like it. I just started to like it, you know. Then I saved a little money. I bought a bike. And then I got a job. There was a market right near where we lived, you know, they sell

fruits, everything. And those Italian men, they used to sell bananas. And I knew this man. This man's brother worked for my father in Italy, you know. So I used to hang around a couple hours every day selling bananas. And I learned how to say, "Bananas, two dozen for a quarter." (he laughs)

LEVINE: Had you ever seen a banana before you came here?

FIERAMOSCA: I saw bananas at the, at the island first. No, I'd never seen bananas in Italy. Now they have them. But then, them days they didn't export bananas like they do now, you know. Two dozen for a quarter. Then we used to deliver bananas with the son, had a truck. I used to go all over the county delivering bananas.

LEVINE: Two dozen for a quarter?

FIERAMOSCA: Two dozen bananas for a quarter. Now you get one banana for a quarter. (he laughs) Then I started to work with another guy. You know, part time jobs, small jobs. He had a horse and wagon and he used to sell vegetables all over. House to house, you know.

And he used to give me a little basket, I hang it on my arm and he put like six bananas, little bit of everything, and you go to a house and, and you sell them and they pay you. Fifty cents, it depends on how much they spend. That was good. Then I started to work in a factory where they make jackets. You know, leather jackets and all that stuff. And I worked there for a long, long time. And, see, I was a handy from, because I had a trade. Geez, I could do anything right now. Most of the, the buildings over here, they're put up by me. And the boss, he said to me, "Do that," and I do, you know. I used to make benches for people to work in, and I got along real good with them. And I worked there for about, oh, four, five years. Then I quit and went to another place to do the same kind of work. I was getting three times more money than he was paying me, you know. Then he come and get me. He says, "You got to come back and work for me. I'm going to give you a position." He made me like a foreman, you know, and I was only eighteen, nineteen years old, twenty years old then. But I learned so much from them. But then in 1934 my (unintelligible) Between that time I was selling used cars, you know.

I hang around the place where they sell the used cars, so the guys says to me, "Go ahead, try to sell the car." So I, I was selling a few cars and, and making a little commission, you know, two dollars, five dollars. Then while I was working in the, in the factory, and I was selling cars, I came to own a limousine. So I did a little limousine work, you know, weddings, funerals, see. Then the Depression come, who's going to rent a limousine, you know. So in 1934 I had a little money saved, not much. And there was two other guys that work with me. And they said, "What do you say we open up a factory of our own," you know. I says, "Okay, what do I got to lose." One of the guys didn't go in, but one guy went in, and we opened up a factory. We had about ten people working for us. But the other guy, my other partner, he was a college graduate, you know. I wouldn't say that he was too smart for me, but I let him get away with things, you know. Like I used to work all day, twelve, fourteen hours a day, try to build the thing up, you know. And he used to be outside playing the horses or go gambling, you know. So when I couldn't take any more, I just left. I left him everything. I left him my part of the

business. I said, "You keep it. I don't want it."

LEVINE: Was this making jackets?

FIERAMOSCA: Yeah. So when I come home that I, I broke up with him, them days you didn't need much money to start a little business, you know. Because with a little money you got a lot. Now you need a lot of money and you, but anyway I think one of my sisters give me couple a hundred dollars. I still had that limousine. I sold it, and I went to see some manufacturer in New York, that buys leather coats, woolen coats, you know, mackinaws, things like that. I went to see him, I says if I open up a factory will he buy from me. He says, "You give me an address and come back." Well, when he said that to me, I went back to Elizabeth, I went, I didn't sell the limousine yet, I still had it. I got the limousine and took the back seat off. I went to New York and I bought six sewing machines, six staples, a mold, everything that I need to set up six sewing machines. I call the electrician. He can't do that today. I called him, I says how long it take you to

hook that up. You hook it up on the same day. Went to the printer and I tell him to print me some cards, and he print them while I was there. Soon as I got the cards I went to New York to see the guy. I give him the card, because he knew what I could do. Because when I was with the other guy, I was, we were selling to him. But he didn't like the other guy. So he give me an order for five hundred suede jackets, you know. Now I said where am I going to get the money to buy the leather for the five hundred suede jackets. But I went to this company that sell all the kind of leather. I think his name was Richmond, something like that. An Irishman. I said to him, "You know, you remember me?" He says, "Yeah." I says, "What do you need?" And he says, I figured out how many thousand. You buy leather by the foot, you know, the skins. I don't know, ten thousand feet of suede. Whatever it was. And he gave it to me. And he sent it to me. And he trusted me. And that's they way it went on. Then the following years I got bigger and bigger and bigger. In 1937 I moved to a big place and I had about thirty people working for me. In 1940 I builded [sic] my own factory, my own building in

Elizabeth. It was pretty big. It was sixty feet wide and a hundred fifteen feet long. It was pretty big. And I started there with sixty machines, I put up. And I used to sell a lot of coats, you know. Then the war started. Of course, that time I was like about twenty-seven, you know. And in '41 I put up a bid for a government contract. I bid seventy-five thousand fatigue jackets. You know the jackets that they used to fix the cars with, you know, the army. But that, that was not a good jacket for me to make. That was too cheap. You know, I was making good stuff, you know. I kind of lost a little money on that contract. But then we used to get, the government used to send you a bid, you know, what's, what they're going to buy. And I put on a bid for twenty-five thousand mackinaws. You know, double breast coats for the army. Well, there I did all right, because that was my line of work, you know, that was a little better stuff. And then I bid for fifty thousand, I got it. Then there was a guy in Ohio that bid on the mackinaws, like the ones I like. But he couldn't make them. He had trouble. So the, the government, he called the government, he said, "Look, I'm running into a

trouble over here. What can we do for me to get out of, out of this contract?" So they said, the government said to him to call me. And the guy called me. He says, I got, about twenty thousand he had. I don't know how many, I don't remember. He says, "I'm in a little trouble. I can't make this. The government recommend you could finish the contract for me." Well, I know how much he got to, see, the government gives you everything. You only buy small things, the government gives you wool, everything. I says to him, "I know how much you got from the government. I have to get more than what you got, because I'm in a different area," you know, labor was high. Down there labor was, and he agreed with me. And he sent me all the material that he got, then the government sent me the rest of the material, and I got him out of the hole. I finished his contract on time, because he was penalized like a hundred, two hundred dollars a day every day you're late, you know. And I made uniforms, and then I made cold weather jackets for the navy. I made a lot of them. Like a hundred fifty thousand, you know. Then the war was over, and it took some time to get started. You couldn't buy material, you

lose all your customers, you know. And it took a little time to build up again. In 1949, I always wanted a farm, because I had four horses that I used to keep them on another farm and pay board so much a month. But never cleaned the stalls, they never did anything right. I had to go there a couple days a week and clean the stalls. You know what the stalls are.

LEVINE: What did you do with the horses when you, when you had them boarded? I mean, what, what did you do, ride them?

FIERAMOSCA: I used to, I used to ride them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: Then I had, I had a son that he was twelve, thirteen years old, and he got a horse to ride, too. And then when I bought this place and moved in 1949. The only thing that was here, that big barn there. (he indicates) The rest, the one right up front there. Then I built all the others. And friend of mine talked me into going in the thoroughbred

business. I said, "I don't like that. I just want my show horses. I don't want to bother with thoroughbreds." He says to me, "Go ahead. Go in. You got a beautiful place." So I went to a horse sale where they sell thoroughbreds. What was it. I knew conformation of a horse, you know, I know horses in and out. And all the big shots that bought all the high class, they sold mares. A mare is a female, you know, the mother. And at the end there was two mares left over that nobody wanted. But I was looking at one of them all through the sale. I was looking. So after the sale was over, if I didn't buy it, I says to him, "What do you want for that horse, the one mare?" He says, "Six hundred dollars. He's got a baby on the side, and one in the belly." Then they had another one, well bred. She was by Man O' War. You heard of Man O' War. So I says "What do you want for that one?" "Six hundred dollars." So I bought the two of them. Well, the one, the first one that I bought that I like made me famous. For them people that mare did nothing. For me, I had ten foals out of her. Out of ten foals nine got to the races, four of them were stake horses. You know what a stake horse is?

They win big races. Them days they wouldn't have raced them for thirty thousand, forty thousand. Well, "Geez," I said to myself, "Where the hell I been?" And I keep growing and growing till, till four years ago I was the biggest one in New Jersey. I was the, as a matter of fact I got an award last week from the state for all the things that I accomplished for the, the breeders of New Jersey. Yeah, we did all right. I used to win twenty-five, thirty races every year, forty races every year.

LEVINE: How many horses did you have racing in a year? Or how many races did your horses...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I, when I first started my stable I had only three horses in the stable. The following year I had six. Then until a couple years ago when things was going good I had fourteen, fifteen horses at the race track, you know. Because they used to make money, and it cost a lot of money to keep them, you know. But the last couple years I haven't done too good. I have started changing the blood line. You know what I mean.

LEVINE: What, what is it, the horse that has brought you the most success would you say? Is there one, or maybe there's more?

FIERAMOSCA: Can I move with this thing?

LEVINE: No, maybe when we're finished...

FIERAMOSCA: Okay.

LEVINE: ...the...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I had a, a horse that really started me off that was good. It was a son to that mare. He was a good race horse and won stakes in New York for me. Then when I retired him I put him in stud. You know, a breeder. And he was good producer. All his sons and daughters won a lot of money. One of his son I just re-, I retired him ten years ago. He's still here. Does nothing. He won four hundred thousand dollars. That was them days, you know. Today it would have been a million dollars, you know. I had, had a lot, a lot of real good horses. A lot of real good hor-, as a matter of fact, a

filly, Friday night at Garden State, this Friday past. A filly that I own the father win a hundred fifty thousand dollar race. See, I own the father. Remember that. So I get more mares to breed to them, you know.

LEVINE: What, what was your wife's name?

FIERAMOSCA: Lucy.

LEVINE: And her maiden name? (voice off-mic)

FIERAMOSCA: Fiorello. (someone comes in the room)

LEVINE: Wait. We're going to stop for a minute. (break in tape) Okay, we're resuming again after an interruption. Your, your son's name?

FIERAMOSCA: San. Santo.

LEVINE: Santo.

FIERAMOSCA: That's my father's name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: See, Italian you use the, the first son you name after your father.

LEVINE: Oh. Do you have grandchildren?

FIERAMOSCA: He's got three daughter's and a son. And he's got five grandkids which makes me five great grandkids.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, what is, what would you, this is probably going to be hard for you, but what would you say you're most proud of having done in your life?

FIERAMOSCA: Have I done?

LEVINE: Yeah.

FIERAMOSCA: My life?

LEVINE: What you've done that's made you very proud.

FIERAMOSCA: Well, most proud it was that I had a, I have a real

good son. That's real, and my wife was a good woman. Very good woman. Well, everything I did was good. The best thing I ever did is when I bought this farm. Because if I had to buy now, I couldn't touch it, you know. But when I bought it forty-five years ago it was a pretty reasonable price.

LEVINE: Do you think the fact that you came here as an immigrant when you were thirteen years old, do you think made a difference in the kind of person you are, or anything...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, I always work. I always won something, and I always live big. In order to live big you got to work big, you know. Like when I was a kid. I was twenty-two years old, I had a car, they called it Pierce Arrow Pierce Arrow is the Cadillac of today. You know, I always, in order to do that you got to work, you know. And when I work in the factory for that boss that I worked four years, I learned so much there. That I used to go around, people used to call me and I used to go to a different factory in the night and fix sewing machines. See. I learned quick, you know. And I needed to do that to

keep up the way I was living, you know. I had a nice car all the time, nice clothes. I used to like to go to Atlantic City on weekends. Of course, they didn't have no gambles [sic] then, you know. You go to Atlantic City on weekends, it used, it used to cost you twenty-five, thirty dollars. Big hotels, the room was two dollars. Steak and dinner, a dollar and a half, two dollars, you know. It ain't like now, you know. In order to do that you got to work. You can't get it for nothing.

LEVINE: And how about this time in your life? How do you feel about this phase of, of life, with the farm, and...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, right at this time now? Well, now I tell you. I really work hard. For me to talk to you today, I started five o'clock this morning, I started. I feed all the horses on the farm. This morning we bred one mare, you know. Mate. And I don't breed any mares unless I'm here. I don't let the help to do unless I'm here, see. Until three years ago I used to breed twenty-fi-, a hundred twenty-five mares every year to different people. I always had

it steady on this farm a hundred horses that belonged to me and different people, you know. I was supposed to come to the Island when they were building up. I don't know if you know Sonny Warble [PH]. Well, he was (unintelligible) that worked with Iacocca, building up the Island. And I was supposed to come there. Then my friend died, Mr. Warble. The only thing I could say, if you don't want anything you don't get it here. But if you want and you work you'll get it. This is the land of opportunity. The only thing, I don't know what it is, but the country's going wild. You know what I mean? Too many killings. Too many bad things happen. And I'm glad I live in this, this part of the state here. See, this, like heaven over here, you know. I spent about four hours a day sitting here, because now I'm eighty-two years old and I get tired a little bit, you know. So I come in here twelve o'clock, and I stay here till one thirty. That's when the people go back to work, one thirty, and I go work with them. Then three o'clock eases off and I come here for a couple hours again. Then I go home. See, Mary, my sister, she comes here three days a week. And she stays with me three days

a week. Then Saturday she goes back to her home. I don't know what else you want me to tell you.

LEVINE: Well, I think maybe we've covered it. We're just about out of tape.

FIERAMOSCA: Oh, yeah? (he laughs)

LEVINE: Wonderful story. Thank you so much. I appreciate you getting up at five o'clock this morning. (he laughs) It was well worth it. Your story is certainly...

FIERAMOSCA: Well, this, this, has been busy week for me. I've been trying to go to the doctor for two years to get, I usually go every year to get checked up. I didn't go for two years, so I went yesterday. So tomorrow I'm going to go over to another doctor to get checked up. See, I get little things on my faces. (he indicates) See that?

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

FIERAMOSCA: But this has been there for about twenty years.

This is all right. But sometimes I get little red spots. So if I go to the doctor he'll take care of it, you know, because you could run into trouble if you don't, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I've been speaking with John Fieramosca. And we're here, it's May 5th, 1994, and...(voice off-mic)...(tape ends)