

**EI-677**

**AUGUST MERCANDINO**

**BIRTHDATE: FEBRUARY 24, 1904**

**INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 29, 1995**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW:**

**RUNNING TIME: 59:21**

**INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST**

**RECORDING ENGINEER:**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: TOM'S RIVER, NEW JERSEY**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: NICOLE STOTZ**

**ITALY, 1921**

**AGE: 17**

**SHIP: ZEPABELLE**

**PORT: GENOA, ITALY**

**RESIDENCES: PRALUNGO, ITALY; EASTON, PENNSYLVANIA**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1995. I'm in Tom's River, New Jersey with August Mercandino. Mr. Mercandino came from the north of Italy in 1921 and he was seventeen years old at that time. Present also is Mrs. Mercandino, who's going to be joining us and perhaps may interject with information, as the interview goes on.

Anyway, thank you very much for letting me come out, and can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

MERCANDINO: February 24, 1904.

SIGRIST: And where in the north of Italy were you born?

MERCANDINO: Is a small town near the Alps, they call it Pralungo.

SIGRIST: Pralungo.

MERCANDINO: Pralungo.

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SIGRIST: Mrs. Mercandino, do you know? Can you spell?

EMERCANDINO Yes, P-R-A-L-U-N-G-O.

SIGRIST: P-R.

EMERCANDINO A-L.

SIGRIST: A-L.

EMERCANDINO U-N.

SIGRIST: U-N.

EMERCANDINO G-O.

SIGRIST: G-O. Pralungo.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What can you tell me about that town when you were a child? What sticks out in your mind?

MERCANDINO: Well, was a small town and in the Alp and was right after the First World War, we didn't get nothing to eat. It was very—it we very poor. That's all.

SIGRIST: What did the buildings look like in that town?

MERCANDINO: They all make out of stucco. All the buildings they make out of stucco.

SIGRIST: And is there one building in that town that sticks out in your mind from when you were growing up there?

MERCANDINO: Well, that was the store nearby. The coop-, cooperativa. Huh?

SIGRIST: Mrs. Mercandino, if you need to speak, speak full voice. Speak full voice so the microphone picks you up.

EMERCANDINO A beautiful church you have. That you have—

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah, the church was beautiful. That's, yes. Otherwise was the city hall. Most time there was nothing to it.

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

MERCANDINO: Was a house with two room downstairs and two room upstairs and we had an attic on top. That where I used to sleep, in attic.

SIGRIST: And it was stucco like the other houses?

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what kind of a roof did it have on it?

MERCANDINO: All—all—

EMERCANDINO Tile.

MERCANDINO: No, there was not tile. They was like clay. They all make like this. It was—

SIGRIST: Like a semi-circle.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So there were two stories and then an attic.

MERCANDINO: And a attic.

SIGRIST: And what kind of floor did you have in the house?

MERCANDINO: Wood.

SIGRIST: Wood floors.

MERCANDINO: Wood.

SIGRIST: How did you heat the house?

MERCANDINO: With a stove in the kitchen.

SIGRIST: What kind of a stove?

MERCANDINO: Regular stove. We didn't get nothing else but that. We used to burn wood in the stove. In the stove. Everything and nothing else. We always stay in the kitchen at wintertime.

SIGRIST: Did it get cold in the winter?

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- MERCANDINO: Oh, my God! We had snow almost sometime three or four feet tall.
- SIGRIST: Is there a story that you have about experiencing a snowstorm or something like that in Italy as a child?
- MERCANDINO: No, I don't have. No, no.
- SIGRIST: You just remember that it was deep.
- MERCANDINO: The snow was up in the Alp, but by us, too, it used to come like two, three feet tall, high. But I used to go work about a mile away from home. I was five years old when I went to work, and we used to walk in the snow this high, with short pants on.
- SIGRIST: So the snow was about three feet high and you were working in short pants.
- MERCANDINO: Yeah. At that time, nobody cleaned the snow in the street, nothing.
- SIGRIST: How did you light your house?
- MERCANDINO: [Laughs] We had candle. No, not candle. We have something there about this big, they put the oil in it and we used to light that thing there. It was a little bit of a light, nothing else. Then my father later on, he put the electric in the house.
- SIGRIST: Do you remember when that happened, when your father had the house converted to electricity?
- MERCANDINO: Oh, sure I remember.
- SIGRIST: Can you tell me what that process was?
- MERCANDINO: Oh, the light was, you know, not light like this. It was only a little tiny bulb, you know. That's all we did. We used to stay like that.
- SIGRIST: What did they have to do to the house in order to put the electricity in it?

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MERCANDINO: They had to take the wire from the street and bring them over, where I used to live. And then they have a light outside, so everybody can see when they was coming in in the street. My father did that.

SIGRIST: Did he run—how did he run the wires into the house?

MERCANDINO: Well, like they do over here. You know, the wire come over—when they come over from the street, the wire. There they come in and out, like they do over here.

SIGRIST: Were the wires inside the wall?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, yeah, sure it was the wall, inside the wall, yeah.

SIGRIST: So did he have to take the walls down to do that?

MERCANDINO: Well, my uncle, he was a—used to build the houses. He cut the place just to put the wire in, then he block it. That's the only way you can do it.

SIGRIST: How did your family feel about having electricity in their house?

MERCANDINO: Oh, they was happy, that's all. There's nothing—you know, it was nothing really new.

SIGRIST: How old were you when that happened?

MERCANDINO: Oh, I don't know. I was about nine or ten. That's it. Nine or ten years old.

SIGRIST: Did you have running water in your house?

MERCANDINO: No!

SIGRIST: Where did the water come from?

MERCANDINO: We used to go in the street and pick it up. In the wintertime, we used to, was a little brick alongside the street. We used to break the ice, to pick the water to wash our face. And then they had a well, and we used to put the pail go down in the well there. Pull the pail up and take the water.

SIGRIST: Was there a sink inside the house?

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MERCANDINO: No, we didn't get nothing like that. No, no.

SIGRIST: Did you have a toilet inside the house?

MERCANDINO: No, no. No, outside toilet.

SIGRIST: Did you have glass on the windows in the house?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah, we have glass. Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have a garden with the house?

MERCANDINO: Yes, we have a garden in the back of the house.

SIGRIST: What did you grow in the garden?

MERCANDINO: Well, vegetable and my father, he had some kind of fruit. Plum. Vegetable, that's all.

SIGRIST: And what did you do with the vegetables?

MERCANDINO: We used to eat them.

SIGRIST: Yes, did you do anything else with them?

MERCANDINO: No.

SIGRIST: Did you ever sell any of the vegetables?

MERCANDINO: No, no, no, no, no. Everybody over there, they have a garden in the back of the house, and they used to raise vegetables you eat in the wintertime. Like cabbage and something like that.

SIGRIST: What kinds of food do people eat in the north of Italy up there? What did you eat when you lived in Italy?

MERCANDINO: Well, we used to eat polenta, if you know what it is.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for us on tape what polenta is?

MERCANDINO: Well, you put the water with salt in it. Then you put corn meal, and you cook them. Then you turn them all the time like that. You turn them until it's cooked. Then we used to eat that with milk. You know, we didn't have nothing to eat over there. That's why I come over in this country.

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SIGRIST: Did you ever eat meat when you lived in Italy?

MERCANDINO: Once a week, breast of veal, we used to eat.

SIGRIST: Breast of veal.

MERCANDINO: Once a week, on Sunday.

SIGRIST: What did you drink in Italy?

MERCANDINO: Oh, wine.

SIGRIST: And where did you get the wine?

MERCANDINO: We used to buy it. A place they used to buy the wine, we have to buy it.

SIGRIST: Did anyone ever tell you—oh, no, scratch that. Where did you sleep in the house?

MERCANDINO: Well, in a bed, but I didn't get no mattress. They used to take, you know, the corn meal—the corn, the leaves?

SIGRIST: The husks.

MERCANDINO: Yeah. They used to take that, put them in a big bag with hole in it in both sides. Two hole like this and two hold over there, and when you get up, my mother, she used to raise the thing again.

SIGRIST: Fluff it up.

MERCANDINO: Fluff it up, yeah, and when you go to sleep, you used to sink in.

SIGRIST: Did you sleep alone in a bed?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, it was alone. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay, I'll go back to the question I was going to ask you. Do you know anything about your birth? When you were born, did anyone ever tell you anything about when you were born?

MERCANDINO: Well, this is a long story. When I was born, my father went away and my mother went to work. So they give me to

another woman to mind when I was a little boy, very little, and I was there until I was about six or seven years old. Then when I come back, I didn't know my mother. I didn't know my father because they didn't raise me. My father, when he come back from where he was, I remember he picked me up. I was scared because I don't know who he was. That's my story over there.

SIGRIST: Where did your father go?

MERCANDINO: He went to South Italy.

SIGRIST: To the south of Italy?

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: To do what?

MERCANDINO: He was working in textile. He was fixing machine in the textile.

SIGRIST: Why did he leave the town?

MERCANDINO: For the money. Make more money over there.

SIGRIST: What did he do in the town where you were?

MERCANDINO: He was doing the same thing.

SIGRIST: Working on machinery?

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did your mother go?

MERCANDINO: My mother, she was a textile worker. She used to run the loom. They used to make, where I come from, a lot of woolen mill. They used to make material to make suit, all that kind of stuff.

SIGRIST: Did she ever visit you while—

MERCANDINO: She used to come down to see once a month. I remember that because I say I was about six or seven years old when they took me home. I remember like it was now. Once a month I used to see my mother.

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SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the family that you lived with? Who they were and—

MERCANDINO: They was not related to us at all. They were not related. What happened, that woman she had a baby and the baby die, and so that's why they take me. She used to feed with— they told me she used to feed me like she used to feed her own baby.

SIGRIST: She would breast feed you?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and then in the summertime used to take me up in the street and they had a goat, and on the way up, she used to stop and milk the goat and give me that milk to drink. Goat milk. That was very good.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about living with that family from when you were a small child?

MERCANDINO: It's nothing that I remember much. I remember they had a boy and a son, and a boy and a daughter. I mean a daughter and a boy, but they was, you know, much older. That's all I remember. I remember nothing else.

SIGRIST: And so you went back to live with your mother and father when you were—

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So I'm to believe that your father had returned from the south of Italy at that time.

MERCANDINO: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Did they live in the same house that they lived in before?

MERCANDINO: Same house. Same house.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

MERCANDINO: When my grandfather die, my father bought the house from grandmother, and my grandmother, she always live with us until she die.

SIGRIST: Whose mother is she?

- MERCANDINO: My mother.
- SIGRIST: That's your mother's parents?
- MERCANDINO: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: How come you didn't go to live with the grandmother when your parents went to their respective jobs?
- MERCANDINO: Well, my grandmother, she couldn't take me. They had thirteen children.
- SIGRIST: Oh.
- MERCANDINO: She couldn't keep me there, until my grandfather die, my mother took her mother in in the house. They were with us.
- SIGRIST: I see. Well, tell me a little bit about what you had to go through to adjust to living with your mother and father, once you went back to live with them.
- MERCANDINO: Well, it was nothing to it. We just lived together, that's all.
- SIGRIST: Well, you said you were a little frightened of your father.
- MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah, then I was. When I came to this country. I still, when I came to this country, I still was afraid of my father. I was seventeen years old, but then we went back to Italy in 1949, then it was altogether different. We was talking then. We was talking and it was nice. It was beautiful.
- SIGRIST: Did you have to make any adjustments to being with your mother?
- MERCANDINO: No. No. No.
- SIGRIST: What work did your father get when he returned to your town?
- MERCANDINO: He was working in textile. He goes fixing the machine in a textile mill.
- SIGRIST: I see.
- MERCANDINO: That's why he went into South Italy, because he was making more money there. Then when he got—they had to teach

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other people to work, when he was finished, he come back to the town.

SIGRIST: I see. I see. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, I got one brother.

SIGRIST: And what's his name?

MERCANDINO: Armand.

SIGRIST: Armand.

MERCANDINO: Armand.

SIGRIST: Armand, and is he younger or older?

MERCANDINO: He's thirteen younger than me.

SIGRIST: Thirteen years younger than you.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, my goodness.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Wow. Tell me, did you go to school in Italy?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about going to school.

MERCANDINO: Well, I went to school, only it was the first class. When I was thirteen years, they send me to work. I couldn't go ahead. Soon as I was thirteen years, my mother—[sound fading]

SIGRIST: Oh, wait. We're going to just—caught in your foot here. I'm just going to put the microphone back on. There you go. Yeah.

MERCANDINO: What I was talking about? [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Your mother—we were talking about school, going to school and they sent you to work when you were thirteen, but you said you went to school for a year.

EMERCANDINO No, no.

MERCANDINO: No. More than that. I went to school until the first—fourth grade. Fourth. Fourth. Then after that, they sent me to work in the textile mill.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to school? What sticks out in your mind about that experience?

MERCANDINO: Oh, it was nothing. Nothing. You know, it was like when you go to school over here.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah. Specially my mother. My father, he was—you know, when my father was five—no, four brother and a sister and the mother died when they was very little. Young. You know, they went to work—my father went to work when he was seven years old, and all the other brothers, too. You know, it was tough for them, and my grandfather was a shoemaker. He was making shoes.

SIGRIST: Were they all from the same—

MERCANDINO: They all in the same time, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents me?

MERCANDINO: No, that I don't know. I don't know. They met in the town because they both live in the same town.

SIGRIST: What job did they send you to when you were thirteen?

MERCANDINO: Twelve.

SIGRIST: Twelve.

MERCANDINO: Well, first they send me work in a foundry.

SIGRIST: In a foundry. Like an iron foundry.

MERCANDINO: Yeah. Yeah. They used to hit me over there. Was one guy, he used to hit me all the time because I was supposed to— they want you say want to make a wheel, I was supposed to go upstairs and get the wheel and bring them down, so that

they make a form in the dirt. If I would be look because I have to look around, when I was late, he used to hit me on the back all the time. Until I told my father about it and my father come down and the president of the company was the mayor of the city. When my father come down, they call me in the office and I tell them the truth, what happened. So he said, "Take your coat and go home," and from there I went work—I learned to work in textile.

SIGRIST: And can you describe for me what it was you did in the textile mill? What was your job?

MERCANDINO: Well, we used to make spools for—they used to make spool and then the spool, they used to go to another machine and they had a big wheel, tremendous big wheel and they used to make like a warp, they used to call them. Then from there, they bring them to the loom and they use to make the material.

SIGRIST: So the thread is on a spool. Then it goes onto the warp around this big—

MERCANDINO: Big wheel, yeah.

SIGRIST: And then that is what brought to the loom to be woven.

MERCANDINO: To the loom, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your job in there?

MERCANDINO: I was making the spool.

SIGRIST: You did the spools.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you were paid at that young age?

MERCANDINO: Well, I tell you, I was making—that was according to how much you used to make. The spools you used to make. Then they used to give you a bonus, you know. We used to make more than that. I always made a bonus, but the bonus was supposed to keep it for myself, but my mother, she never give it to me. She used to take it, until my friend used to work in that mill as the secretary. Then they fix is that there was no more bonus. So she used to give the money to me.

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Otherwise I would have no money. I never had no money. I didn't have the money to buy a cigarette.

SIGRIST: So you turned over your paycheck right to your mother then, the money.

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did she do with it?

MERCANDINO: She lived, that's all. She used to buy the food, whatever we was able to buy.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you didn't have enough money for a cigarette. When did you start smoking? How old were you?

MERCANDINO: Twelve.

SIGRIST: And do you remember who taught you how to smoke?

MERCANDINO: Nobody. Everybody was smoking over there, twelve, and I stopped to smoke many years ago. About eighteen. I was working yet. I can't remember how old I was, but I stopped smoking.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of cigarettes you were smoking?

MERCANDINO: Macedonia. I always remember that was Macedonia cigarette.

SIGRIST: Macedonia cigarettes.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what did they look like?

MERCANDINO: Like cigarettes over here. It's the same thing. Same thing. The only thing over there you could not buy a cigarette in any store that you want. You only buy the store from run by the government. And like that drugstore was run by the government.

SIGRIST: Why was that?

MERCANDINO: I don't know. I don't know. I can't explain you that.

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SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about World War I and the period between 1914 and 1918 in if the war had any affect on your life?

MERCANDINO: Well, we—it was terrible. Was bad. We had nothing to eat and we used to go in the rice field and pick rice, and the black market, we used to go with our bicycle at night, with a sack on the back. It was not near. And it was about two hours with a bicycle. That's the way we used to eat, at night used to make—they used to make soup with rice and that's it. Just water and rice, that's all.

SIGRIST: What else sticks out in your mind about that time period?

MERCANDINO: About the only thing I know, it was bad. Very bad. Very bad, that's it.

SIGRIST: But it was the food that was the worst part for you.

MERCANDINO: The food. We didn't have no food at all. No food at all. Don't forget—oh, no, we was in war with Germany that time, with Kaiser I think was. We had nothing to eat. That's all.

SIGRIST: Did you ever see any soldiers during that time period?

MERCANDINO: No. No. They didn't come into Italy. The Second World War they did, but not the First World War.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

MERCANDINO: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And how did you practice your religion back then?

MERCANDINO: Well, like we used to go to church on Sunday and after school we used to go in church for prayer. The priest would tell us what to do. You know, like that. Talk all about religion.

SIGRIST: What about at home, how did you practice your religion at home?

MERCANDINO: We never mentioned religion at home. My father—my mother, she was working six days a week and Sunday she had to clean the house, wash because she didn't get no time to do it during the week. She was working and she could never go to church, but she was a religion woman, though.

SIGRIST: Was she more religious than your father? Who was more religious or your—

MERCANDINO: My mother, I think. My mother. I think my mother was more religious.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any prayers that you were taught as a child in Italian?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah, I remember Ave Maria.

SIGRIST: Can you say that in Italian?

MERCANDINO: Say the Ave Maria?

EMERCANDINO Latin.

MERCANDINO: Huh?

EMERCANDINO Latin.

MERCANDINO: It's not in Italian, it's Latin.

SIGRIST: Is there a prayer that you can say in Italian that you remember? Not a Latin prayer.

MERCANDINO: No, everything was Latin over there.

SIGRIST: Everything was in Latin you learned, yeah. [music playing in background] What about a holiday celebration? Did you celebrate the religious holidays?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yes. One day 15 of August. The 15<sup>th</sup> of August was the religious [unclear].

SIGRIST: Is that like a saint celebration?

MERCANDINO: Saint, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you know which saint it is, Mrs. Mercandino?

EMERCANDINO Yeah, Madonna [unclear]—

MERCANDINO: Was the name of the Madonna.

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- SIGRIST: It some feast of the Madonna.
- MERCANDINO: For the Madonna, and then we had the Black Madonna there, too.
- SIGRIST: How did you celebrate? How did you—
- MERCANDINO: Oh, everybody used to go like—go in a saloon in the morning, have a vermouth. In the afternoon everybody used to go out, a good time, that's it. And there's a band playing all the time. They have a place where they used to dance outside. Then I used to play there, too. I used to play in the music over there.
- SIGRIST: Did you say you went to a tavern and had vermouth?
- MERCANDINO: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: That's how the celebration would get going?
- MERCANDINO: This was only start in the morning.
- SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What about Christmas?
- MERCANDINO: Oh, Christmas, we never celebrate it like they do over here. Christmas they used to make like here they make the Christmas tree. Over there they didn't make no Christmas tree because they had the baby Jesus, and we used to go over there and see, they have the baby there laying in a stable like. And we used to go over there and look at him, so it was no Christmas at all for us over there. Not like over here.
- SIGRIST: Was there a special meal that went with Christmas over there?
- MERCANDINO: No, no. No.
- SIGRIST: It just wasn't a very important holiday to celebrate?
- MERCANDINO: Yeah, the meal—the meal was like any other day, like any other Sunday.
- SIGRIST: You said that you played an instrument. What instrument did you play?
- MERCANDINO: Trombone.
- SIGRIST: Played trombone. Who taught you to play the trombone?

- MERCANDINO: Oh, I went to school for that.
- SIGRIST: In Italy.
- MERCANDINO: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: There was a music school in town?
- MERCANDINO: Well, we had a band in town and the teacher is the one that teach me. But before I start to play it, I had to read all the music. That took me about almost a year. You have to go like this all the time, until I was able to read the music. Then they put me in a band, and the teacher told me, "If you don't know—if you think you don't know that note, don't play it," until I got used to it. But when I got used to it, I come to this country. When I was seventeen.
- SIGRIST: So you still played the trombone once you got to America then?
- MERCANDINO: No, no.
- SIGRIST: You didn't?
- MERCANDINO: Oh, wait. This was in Easton, Pennsylvania.
- SIGRIST: Easton, Pennsylvania?
- MERCANDINO: A friend of mine that took me, he was playing in a band there, and he took me there. Columbus Band they used to call it, and they took me there. I don't know what happen over there that they start to fight. We get out. Me and my friend we got out, and I don't go back no more. I got scared, so forget it.
- SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the names of the musical songs that you played in Italy?
- MERCANDINO: No, no, no. No, I don't remember. We used to play marches, that's all.
- SIGRIST: When you were growing up in Italy, what did you know about America? Before you got here, what did you know about this country?

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MERCANDINO: In Italy at that time they used to say, the Americans, they all rich. They didn't realize how hard you got to work over here, too. Right? And I thought when I come over here, I say, "Oh, gee, I go and I was rich. I be a rich man, too." But never happened. [Laughs]

[End of Tape One, Side A/Start of Tape One, Side B]

SIGRIST: Had your father ever been to America?

MERCANDINO: No, no. No.

SIGRIST: No? Did anyone—

MERCANDINO: I only have one uncle in this country, my father's brother. That's the one, he send me the money.

SIGRIST: In Easton?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, the one he send—no, he was in Philipsburg, this one. He send me the money and the paper to come over here.

SIGRIST: Tell me about why you wanted to come to America.

MERCANDINO: Everybody wants to come over here, over there.

SIGRIST: But why? Is it the money? What was it that—

MERCANDINO: It was the money. Everything. Everything, but mostly it's the money. I want to tell you one thing, what my mother—what my mother said. The American thing, they only got the money good, nothing else. I was offended with my mother, but they excuse her because she didn't know any better.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about you going to America?

MERCANDINO: Oh, that's the one they send me over here. They're the one they write to my brother to send me the paper and the money. That what my uncle did, over here in Philipsburg.

SIGRIST: They wrote to your uncle to send you the—

MERCANDINO: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you have to do to get ready to leave Italy?

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MERCANDINO: Well, we have to go—we have to go to the American Consulate, get the—the first time I was supposed to come over here, they won't let me come in. I was young. The second year I went over with a friend of mine that he know the consul, American consul and then no problem at all. I got the passport. Then I went to the agency, get the ticket for the boat.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of medical—

MERCANDINO: No, the medical is only here on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: It was here in America, but not in Italy you didn't have to do that.

MERCANDINO: No.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to go to the American Consulate? Was there one in town?

MERCANDINO: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Over the city called Torino. It's about two hours by train.

SIGRIST: So you had to travel to Turin to get to the consulate?

MERCANDINO: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a train before?

MERCANDINO: No.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that experience being on the train?

MERCANDINO: No. I was so happy to come over here, that I never think about the train or nothing. But it was—what was bad, at the boat.

SIGRIST: Okay, we haven't gotten you on the boat yet. Hang on. Hang on. Let's get you on the boat before we talk about it. What did you pack to take with you to come to America?

MERCANDINO: Oh, my God. I had an old second-hand suit on, an old pair of shoes, pair of stocking. Nothing else in the valise.

SIGRIST: And what was in the valise?

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MERCANDINO: Nothing. That's all I tell you.

SIGRIST: Was there an object that you took with you as a remembrance of Italy?

MERCANDINO: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did anyone give you anything to take?

MERCANDINO: No. Oh, yeah, they gave me my father's aunt, they gave me some towel to bring to some cousin over here in United States.

SIGRIST: A towel? Towels?

MERCANDINO: Towels.

SIGRIST: Huh. Was there any kind of a send off, a gathering for you before you left?

MERCANDINO: [Laughs] No, no, no. My father come to the station, to the city where I took the train. I think it was another uncle that came. Then I took the train and I went and that's it.

SIGRIST: And the train—where did you go to get on the ship?

MERCANDINO: Genoa.

SIGRIST: And how long of a ride is it from your town to Genoa?

MERCANDINO: See, we make that by car when we went over there. It's about four hours.

SIGRIST: By car? I'm wondering how long the train ride was from when you left to when you arrived in Genoa?

MERCANDINO: Oh, I don't know. Four or five car. It was a small train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that train ride, going to Genoa?

MERCANDINO: No.

SIGRIST: Are you by yourself?

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MERCANDINO: No, I had another woman from the town.

SIGRIST: From your town, another woman?

MERCANDINO: If it wasn't for this woman, I wouldn't be here today neither. She was supposed to take care of me.

SIGRIST: Like a chaperone.

MERCANDINO: Yeah, until I come over here. And I come over here, the boat when it come over here. It was in Thursday, and we stayed three days in the boat for quarantine before they take us to Ellis Island. Then they took us to Ellis Island on a barge like. Then from there, I went through examination, and then I wait for the train. Six o'clock I took the train. But I know my uncle, he was there waiting for me in New York, but they—whatever they did, they missed the ship to go to Ellis Island. So when I was in Ellis Island, I saw a place where they send the telegram away, and I went over there in Italian. I went over there, I want to send a telegram in this address. I had the address where I was supposed to go. They went over there, there was nobody there by my uncle. So they bring it to the people next door, and the people next door, they bring it to my aunt's father, and they wasn't home. Then when they come home, they see that and they come in the station, pick me up.

SIGRIST: Was the chaperone, the woman with you through that whole experience?

MERCANDINO: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Where did she go away?

MERCANDINO: When she got off the boat, she just got off because her husband was in United States already. He pick her up and that's it.

SIGRIST: So that was it. So when the ship docked, you went off to Ellis Island, or were in quarantine actually before Ellis Island. She just got off the ship and went home.

MERCANDINO: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

MERCANDINO: The Zepabelle.

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SIGRIST: And what do you remember about seeing the ship for the first time?

MERCANDINO: Oh, for me it was new. I seen stuff like a city, you know, but in a ship, we used to eat on the floor. Did I tell you that before?

SIGRIST: No, no, tell me about it now.

MERCANDINO: We used to eat on the floor, and they [unclear] being sick together. They gave you a sack with one dish, one fork, one knife, one spoon and one bottle of wine, empty though. So we didn't like that. Nobody liked the food over there.

SIGRIST: On the ship?

MERCANDINO: On the ship. Nobody. So at night we used to go down below to sleep. Was one bed there and one bed at the top. And then the ship, when it left Genoa, it stopped in Naples and when all the Naples people come in there, they stole everything we have. We could have the tale set already downstairs to eat breakfast. They stole everything. That's why we had to stay upstairs. Right there in the front of the ship, right there we used to sit there.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being on the ship/

MERCANDINO: Oh, it was nothing else. Nothing.

SIGRIST: What did you do all day?

MERCANDINO: Nothing. We used to—we didn't have a place to sit or nothing. We used to sit on the floor, until one day the ship it starts to go like that, up and down, up and down, with big wave. Just before we got into New York, the night before. They all send us downstairs and I fall asleep. Good thing I fall asleep. Until then, then they say when we get up in the morning, the ocean was calm like beautiful and we came to New York.

SIGRIST: How long did the ship take to get to New York?

MERCANDINO: We sailed the 6<sup>th</sup> of May. We got in New York the 18<sup>th</sup> of May.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else that you remember about being on the ship or anything that you might have seen that you had never seen before, when you were on the ship?

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MERCANDINO: Oh, it was the [unclear], Rock Gibraltar. That's the one that I saw and once in a while you used to see like a small island. I don't know what it was.

SIGRIST: Did you see any animals from the deck of the ship?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah, we used to see those dolphins go in and out in the boat, in front of the boat. But when we went to—oh, no, this is when we went to Italy before—after. When we stopped in Spain.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when the ship came into New York?

MERCANDINO: Oh, the—yeah, yeah, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that was like?

MERCANDINO: Everybody, "Hey, Yea, Hey." Everybody used to holler, you know, but I don't know what it was until I come over here. I know the French donate that, I think, to America, the Statue of Liberty. We pass the Statue of Liberty, then the boat stopped there after that. Then the pilot come in on a boat, check all the passport, everything that was all right. Then we went to New York. Dock in New York.

SIGRIST: Now, why was the ship quarantined for three days before you were let out?

MERCANDINO: Because they don't want the people that come over here with disease, and every day we used to take a shower. They was afraid that time, especially Naples, the people there was not clean at all. You can see it was there with kids, those thing they got in their hair. I don't know what they call them.

SIGRIST: Lice.

MERCANDINO: Lice. Yeah, used to see that.

SIGRIST: Well, what happened during those three days? You said you had to take a shower. Was there anything else—

MERCANDINO: No, after we was in New York, we didn't take no more shower, no.

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SIGRIST: When the ship was quarantined for those three days before you were brought to Ellis Island, had the ship docked already, or were you just anchored in the harbor?

MERCANDINO: No, the ship was docked already.

SIGRIST: The ship had docked.

MERCANDINO: Yes.

SIGRIST: But no one was let off, you had to stay on the ship.

MERCANDINO: No, we had to stay there, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

MERCANDINO: And we used to watch. Outside they was playing baseball. I used to say, "Look those stupid guy. They hit the ball with a stick." You know, I didn't know what baseball. Then was a train going in right there. Now it's not no more train over there at all.

SIGRIST: Tell me about how they took you to Ellis Island when you were finally released from the quarantine?

MERCANDINO: As I told you before, they put me in a barge, all the people that went over there. They went to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Were they all Italians on this ship?

MERCANDINO: Yes. Yes, they was all Italian.

SIGRIST: But some were from the north and some were from the south.

MERCANDINO: But—yeah. But there was one, a boy—was a brother and sister. They was Italian. The sister, she talk the Italian, but the boy didn't talk Italian. They had a different dialect all together than I us, what they use. He couldn't talk Italian, and the boy, they send him back. Then they let him come over here. I don't know if the boy didn't know the language. I don't think it's that. Maybe he had something wrong, I don't know. They sent him back to Italy, to where they come from, right in the harbor.

SIGRIST: From the north?

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- MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah.
- SIGRIST: From the north. Tell me what happened. When the barge stopped at Ellis Island, what happened? Go through the process for me?
- MERCANDINO: Well, like I said before, you go in like go in a church benches. You know, you go benches like this. Was all kind of benches. Every bench was the destination where you were supposed to go. Some go to California and different kinds of states. When they went over there, like I told you, they make an examination. After that, they send me downstairs.
- SIGRIST: When they examined you, what did they look at? What were they looking for?
- MERCANDINO: Everything they went through, from head to foot. They check everything. My heart, my lung, everything. Everything.
- SIGRIST: Did you have to take your clothes off or could you leave your clothes on?
- MERCANDINO: Only the top.
- SIGRIST: The shirt.
- MERCANDINO: Yeah. Then after that, they send them downstairs. Then after we went downstairs for the train and downstairs was all—they was selling, what they call them? I can't remember what—I know I bought cigarette. Oh, ice cream. In Italy they didn't have ice cream. They used to give you a big thing of ice cream. I used to give the money, a dollar maybe or five. I don't know how much I used to give them and they used to give me a lot of money back, and I said, "Geez," and I just put it in my pocket. I was happy because—well, when I left Italy, I told you, I had twenty dollars in my pocket, and when I went home, I still have some money left.
- SIGRIST: Did you have to show money at Ellis Island?
- MERCANDINO: No. No.
- SIGRIST: So at Ellis Island you bought cigarettes and ice cream. Was that at Ellis Island that you bought the ice cream and the cigarettes?

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MERCANDINO: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah, and did you eat anything else while you were there?

MERCANDINO: No, no.

SIGRIST: And how did they get you to the train station?

MERCANDINO: They had the train down below. You went down and there was a train there all ready to leave. I can't remember if it was the Central or Lehigh Valley Train. I know they let me off in Philipsburg. I had a ticket over here. They put a ticket over here.

SIGRIST: On your clothes.

MERCANDINO: On my clothes.

SIGRIST: Taped on your clothes.

MERCANDINO: To let me off in Philipsburg. Then when I got off in Philipsburg, was her father and cousin, they pick me up and they took me home, and when they took me home, they give me something to eat. That time is the first time I eat white bread, with no wood in it. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: White bread with no wood in it.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] How long was it before you got a job?

MERCANDINO: Oh, I started a week. I stayed home a week. Then I do it, they teach me how to weave.

SIGRIST: What did you do during that one week when you didn't have a job?

MERCANDINO: I was lost. I would stay home, that's all. Didn't do nothing. Oh, I was playing music. My uncle had a victrola. You had to crank it like this, put the disk on it. I used to play that, that's all.

SIGRIST: Did you want to go to work?

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MERCANDINO: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah, but when I went to work in the beginning, I tell you, the first week I make six dollars. Then after that, I used to make one week maybe twenty-two, next week twenty-nine, something like that.

SIGRIST: So the first week you made sixteen dollars?

MERCANDINO: Six.

SIGRIST: Six dollars?

MERCANDINO: Six dollars.

SIGRIST: Six dollars.

MERCANDINO: But then after that, I met a fellow, he come from Poland. He didn't speak English. I couldn't speak English, but he was working in a place where they make a lot of money and he told me—

SIGRIST: He's pointing back and forth, you and him. You and him.

MERCANDINO: So at six o'clock at night, he come over to me and he grab me and he took me down where he was working, and he introduced me to the—not the owner.

SIGRIST: The foreman.

MERCANDINO: The foreman. He was very nice, though. He give me a job right away there, when I start to make money. At that time I used to make hundred, hundred and twenty dollars a week.

SIGRIST: This is weaving kind of job?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, weaving. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you explain for me the first job, what you actually had to do. When you say weave, what do you mean? What did you actually do?

MERCANDINO: Well, then what I told you, I learn how to weave and then after that they give me one loom to run. I was running it and then after that they give me two.

SIGRIST: So in this part of Pennsylvania they're doing the same kind of textile work that they did in Italy.

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MERCANDINO: In Italy. In Italy, same thing.

SIGRIST: What kind of cloth are you making?

MERCANDINO: Cloth that you make in suit, like pants suit, whatever. No shirt or nothing like that.

SIGRIST: So it's a heavy—a heavy weight fabric.

MERCANDINO: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And who taught you how to run the loom?

MERCANDINO: My aunt. My uncle's wife.

SIGRIST: Did she work—

MERCANDINO: She worked there.

SIGRIST: She worked there, too.

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you went about learning English.

MERCANDINO: Well, in Philipsburg that time nobody talk English. So—

SIGRIST: Well, were they all Italians or were there—

MERCANDINO: A lot of Italian. Was a lot of Italian there, especially all from the north.

SIGRIST: What were the other nationalities there?

MERCANDINO: Irish. Some Polish, but very few. Most lot of, lot of, lot of Irish, and they used to belong to Ku Klux Klan, too. But was one family that have five children. Her name was Mrs. Lowe, and with the five children and Mrs. Lowe, they used to teach me, teach me, teach me. Every night after work I used to go down there and teach me and teach me until I start to learn and by little, and by little, and by little.

SIGRIST: Was she an Irish woman?

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

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- SIGRIST: And do you remember some of your first words that you learned in English?
- MERCANDINO: "Yes," I guess. [Laughs] Yes and no. I know I hit a guy one time over there. This Irish guy used to insult me all the time. I hit him. I knocked him down in the street and I was kicking him and you're not allowed to kick them when they're down in the street, you know. But after that, they didn't insult me no more.
- SIGRIST: How did he insult you?
- MERCANDINO: Guinea, Whop, that's it.
- SIGRIST: So he was actually—he was making fun of you because you were an immigrant.
- MERCANDINO: That's right, yeah.
- SIGRIST: Did that kind of thing happen a lot back then?
- MERCANDINO: After that, everything was all right. Was a lot of Irish people. Oh, we had a club in Philipsburg, Italian American Pleasure Club and all those Irish, they didn't like the Italian. They all come over there and be a member and we accepted and they turn out to be nice. But before that, one time we was coming down in the street and this was this bunch of Irish in the corner and they insult us. But I had this big guy that just come over from Italy. They went over there, he beat him up. That's why they let us alone after that.
- SIGRIST: The Italian guy beat up the Irish guys?
- MERCANDINO: Yeah, yeah.
- SIGRIST: Were the Irish—I'm just curious. Were the Irish, did they insult any of the other groups, like the Polish?
- MERCANDINO: No. No, I don't think so.
- SIGRIST: It was just the Italians.
- MERCANDINO: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: How did the Italians feel about the Irish?

MERCANDINO: At that time?

SIGRIST: Yes.

MERCANDINO: They didn't like it. But then we all got together. Then it was all right after a couple years that I was there, it was all right.

SIGRIST: I guess I'm just wondering if the Italians beat up the Irish as much as the Irish beat up the Italians. You know, if it's all mutual.

MERCANDINO: No. No. No.

SIGRIST: Where were you living all this time in Philipsburg? Were you living with your uncle and aunt?

MERCANDINO: Yeah, my uncle and my aunt.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where you slept in their house?

MERCANDINO: We had beds, like you do over here.

SIGRIST: But I mean did you have your own room?

MERCANDINO: My own room. They have a house with three room downstairs, three room upstairs.

SIGRIST: And the money that you made, were you responsible for paying them a certain amount of money?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah. I used to send fifty dollars a month to Italy, too, after I start to make a lot of money.

SIGRIST: And so how much did you have to pay your uncle and aunt?

MERCANDINO: Six dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Six dollars a week, and you're sending fifty dollars to Italy?

MERCANDINO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So that doesn't leave you a whole lot.

MERCANDINO: I still have money.

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- SIGRIST: And what would you spend your money on? Other than cigarettes probably?
- MERCANDINO: Oh, cigarettes was nothing, too. I don't even remember. Oh, I used to—oh, a suit. I used to—my uncle, he would always go anywhere they sell cheap stuff and cheap is cheap. I used a pair of pants every week in Philipsburg. Every week I used to tear a pair—buy a pair of pants.
- SIGRIST: Because they were so cheap they just fell apart?
- MERCANDINO: Yeah, they did. But then when I start to grow up, then I was all right. I was well dressed up and everything.
- SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about this Italian club that you brought up?
- MERCANDINO: Oh, it was beautiful over there. It was beautiful, nice people and outside we had two alley and we used to play bocce. You know what bocce is?
- SIGRIST: Bocce ball.
- MERCANDINO: Bocce ball. We used to play that. Inside we have a pool table where everybody used to beat me. I played that for a drink, nothing else and then New Year's Eve we had a party upstairs that you wouldn't believe it. We had table all around. All the food was free and my wife, she come over. She can tell you, she used to enjoy it there, too.
- SIGRIST: When you were first there, when you were first in Philipsburg, was the club important to your life when you first got there or did it come later on?
- MERCANDINO: Well, not right away. No, not right away, but started, you know, I start to meet people and my uncle used to take me up in the club. Then I joined the club, and after that was all right. Beautiful.
- SIGRIST: Was the club an important—were women a member of the club, also?
- MERCANDINO: No.
- SIGRIST: No.

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MERCANDINO: Was only men. But—

SIGRIST: Were there events that women could come to?

MERCANDINO: But the women, they used to come in, yes. We had a barn downstairs, and the women, they used to come in, especially Saturday night. Before I used to go home, I used to go up in the club for a glass of beer and then I used to meet—always the same people that was there. Good friend of mine. Used to have a couple beers, then used to go home. That's all.

SIGRIST: How did you feel—when you were in America, did you miss Italy?

MERCANDINO: No! No! No! Oh, no! I never miss Italy.

SIGRIST: Were you in communication with your mother and father?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah, I used to write all the time and they used to—my mother used to write to me. Used to say all the time, "Come back, we want to see you. We want to see you once more. We want to see you one more." Finally, we decided, me and my wife, to go, 1949 to go back and we was there for four months.

SIGRIST: And what did Italy look like to you after having been in America all that time? How did you feel being there?

MERCANDINO: Well, the little improvement. Not much different. Was not too much different.

SIGRIST: What year did you meet your wife?

MERCANDINO: Oh, she was eight years old, and she was terrible, too.

EMERCANDINO [Laughs]

MERCANDINO: I remember one time was Christmas—

EMERCANDINO [unclear]

MERCANDINO: Was Christmas, we went to—her father and mother, they took us, me and my uncle and my aunt, they took us to a restaurant in Union City and they had music and she wanted to dance, and her mother says, "You don't know how to dance." So she

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stood and showed her mother. She got up and she was dancing and she was rolling like this. [Laughter]

SIGRIST: Running all around.

MERCANDINO: Yeah, I always remember that.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

MERCANDINO: 1943.

SIGRIST: 1943, and say your wife's name for us on tape.

MERCANDINO: Elsie Lombardi.

SIGRIST: Elsie Lombardi, L-O-M-B-A-R-D-I. Lombardi.

EMERCANDINO Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: So you were married in 1940—

MERCANDINO: Three.

SIGRIST: Three, and did you have children?

MERCANDINO: Son.

EMERCANDINO 1945.

MERCANDINO: 1945.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

MERCANDINO: Armand. Armando.

SIGRIST: Armando, and you went back to Italy with your wife?

MERCANDINO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes, for one of those trips.

MERCANDINO: And my son, too. My son was only four years old.

SIGRIST: Were your parents still living then?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes, what did they—

MERCANDINO: That's why we went over there, on account of them.

SIGRIST: What did they think of your wife and child?

MERCANDINO: Oh, they—well, my wife, I have to tell, she treated my other like her mother. Maybe better. But the only one thing, you know, ever since he was a little boy, I used to buy him toys. I used to buy ice cream over there and my mother, she tell me, "Oh, he don't have to have all that," and I told my mother, "He's going to have what I didn't have," because they never give me nothing. But they don't go by birthday, they go by saint. So my saint, they never give me nothing, and when we went back to Italy, my cousin, he was a florist. He come down, a platter like this all full of fresh figs and all in between was all flowers. Was beautiful. You wouldn't believe it. My people, they never give me this much. Never.

SIGRIST: Did you become a citizen?

MERCANDINO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What year?

MERCANDINO: Oh, geez, that's a long time ago. I know it was in February, but it was long time ago. I can't remember the year.

SIGRIST: Yeah. How did it feel when you became a citizen?

MERCANDINO: Oh, one of the—we went over there. This was in Belvedere, New Jersey, the capital of Warren County. Witness, I have the mayor of the town and this Mrs. Low. When I went over there, the man [unclear] he see the mayor and Mrs. Low, he know who they was and he said, "I don't have to ask you no question." This was in wartime. It was against—war against United States. He said, "I don't have to worry, because I know that he's all right," and he give me the paper.

SIGRIST: Do you think of yourself as being Italian or American or Italian American? How do you think of yourself?

MERCANDINO: I think to be an American. I'm an American. I think I be an American. I don't even think about Italy no more. Never.

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SIGRIST: Well, that's a good place for us to end. Mr. Mercandino, I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions.

EMERCANDINO Can we say anything now—

SIGRIST: No, we're still on. Let me just sign off. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with August Mercandino and Mrs. Mercandino on Friday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1995 in Tom's River. Thank you very much, sir.

MERCANDINO: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]