

**EI-74**

**FRANK LAFATA**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D**

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**ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED IN A HOTEL LOBBY IN FLORIDA. THE AUDIO TAPE CONTAINS AN ABUNDANCE OF EXTRANEIOUS NOISE BECAUSE OF THIS BUSY INTERVIEW LOCATION. PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR. ORAL HISTORIAN, ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRATION MUSEUM 5/27/1992**

**LEVINE:** [ I'm here today ] with Mr.Frank Lafata, who came through Ellis Island from Italy in 1922 at the age of thirteen.

**LAFATA:** November the first.

LEVINE: November the first, 1922. And today's date is August 26th, 1991

LAFATA: Birthday, my birthday.

LEVINE: And it's Mr. Lafata's birthday. What birthday is it?

LAFATA: Eighty-two.

LEVINE: His eighty-second birthday. I'm very happy to be here. Why don't we start with saying what town you were born in in Italy.

LAFATA: Okay. I was born in Carini, C-A-R-I-N-I. That's a little town about fifteen miles out of Palermo.

LEVINE: And what date are we, well, you just told me I guess, August...

LAFATA: I was born August 26th, 1909.

LEVINE: Could you describe the town that you were born in?

LAFATA: Well the town, at the time, there were about five thousand people and I was thirteen when I left there, my mother with seven children. My father came here one year prior to that. And we came the following year. My father came 1921. We came in 1922, seven children with my mother. However, sixteen days on the ship and we landed at Ellis Island --I'm the oldest of eight, seven children, by the way --and we stayed in Ellis Island three days, which was known as the quarantine, to see if we had any disease, so forth and so on. After three days, then my father picked us up and we went to a cousin of my mother. We couldn't find any rooms

and nobody would give us any rooms with seven kids. However this cousin of my mother took us in. They were four and we were nine. We became thirteen people who slept on the floor. Nowhere toilet facilities. Toilets were in the back yard, privy walls in the backyard. It was during the winter. You had to go there with snow two feet high. We had to plow our way through to these facilities. However, after a few months my father was able to find rooms but he had to lie his way through. He didn't say he had seven children, he said he only had two. That's how he was able to get rooms in Brooklyn. It was not the best neighborhood, but anyway, there was a barbershop underneath. We moved there about a year and a half and after we left there we moved to Borough Park. The landlord, he was a Neapolitan and we're Sicilians. So the landlord, Neapolitan, well he says "Well," he says "I'm very proud of you because the Sicilian put one over on the Neapolitan." He didn't say he had seven children, he had two children, that's it! He was very please with our behavior because we never made any noise. The barbershop was underneath. He never, never complained about we're making noise. And naturally my father was the only bread winner. I had to go out and do some shoe shining, light the gas lamps in Borough Park and fire coal stoves for the heat because there was no oil burners available. The gas lamps that I used to light for the gas company, forty lamps on the route, I used to get forty dollars a month. Light them in the evening and put them out in the morning. And, firing these boilers in Borough Park three times a day, that was ten dollars a month. And in between now we did a lot of odd jobs just to make ends meet. So therefore, four years later, my father bought a house in Bensonhurst. By that time we started, we were old enough to go to work and support the family. I started in the plumbing business as a helper in 1926, July. Three dollars a day. I gave my mother fifteen, I kept three dollars for carfare, cigarettes, ( he laughs ) and that's how we survived, and I've been in the plumbing industry ever since 1926. However, in addition to that, I worked for the United States Government, the Navy

Yard, Brooklyn, carriers, bomber ships. I started 1940. I had application, they called me in, I started 1940 to 1965. I wind up putting in twenty-five years and I was a pipe fitter supervisor. I became, after two years, I became a pipe-fitter supervisor and, naturally, there was still a language barrier but I was able to get through with the Navy officers and so forth and so on, with the construction end of it, part of it. And today I have a business. I built up a business, plumbing, plumbing and heating, in Brooklyn. My son came into the business, college graduate, mechanical engineer. He's 51, 52 now. Then my son-in-law, he was working for New York City Police Department, he quit the job after seven years and he came into my business. And today, we have a business today which we do state, city and federal work only, and we gross about twenty million dollars a year. So I made them all equal partners, both of them. And I'm enjoying the fruit ( he laughs ) of our, my labor in Florida for the last sixteen years. Bought here in 1920, '75, I bought this apartment and I go back every summer for three or four months and I pitch into the business because it's a business that I, it's buried in my blood. I started, I built it from scratch, from nothing, and I can never stay away from it. I got an office. I got a desk. I do a lot of paper work with the Department of Buildings, inspections, and it keeps my mind occupied. That's the most important thing, to stay alive!

LEVINE: Yes, I agree. Well, that's a...

LAFATA: That's the best I can...

LEVINE: Wonderful story, it's the American Dream come true, huh? ( Frank laughs )

LAFATA: That's right.

LEVINE: Well, let's go back to Palermo or to Carini, was it?

LAFATA: Carini, yes.

LEVINE: Carini. Can you describe where you lived there?

LAFATA: Yes. I've been there four or five times and every time I go back I see the house that I born and I take pictures and so forth and so on.

LEVINE: What was the house like?

LAFATA: The house was a dead-end street. Next door to us they used to keep sheeps. The shepherders would take the sheeps to the market, which was very close by. Big market. Keep them all day, then evening used to bring them back to the barn, it's like a barn, sheepbarn.

LEVINE: What did your father do when you were young?

LAFATA: My father, he was working for a wealthy person distributing water at nighttime for the lemon orchard and olive orchard because we grow olives and lemons in my hometown. Lack of rain, you got to buy water. It's a big pumper station. So, if these landowners, they had lemons, olives, they have to water these trees and they had to buy this water, and my father was the distributor for these landowners.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

LAFATA: Salvatore. Salvatore, my father's name. Well, this was one of his jobs. The other job was, he was packing lemons because we grow lemons in my hometown and we ship them in foreign countries. And I worked there too in this magazine, this warehouse where they packed these lemons. I worked to help my father.

LEVINE: Now, was this your father's own business or he was working for someone?

LAFATA: No, no, no, he worked for somebody.

LEVINE: And how about your mother, what was her name?

LAFATA: My mother's name was Josephine Noto.

LEVINE: Noto?

LAFATA: N-O-T-O. And...

LEVINE: And she was a housewife? Or did she work?

LAFATA: Housewife, housewife.

LEVINE: And you were the oldest child.

LAFATA: I'm the oldest child.

LEVINE: And what about your brothers?

LAFATA: I went and lived with my grandmother and my grandfather, my father's mother, my father's mother and father until we had, 'til my mother had four children. All in one room!

LEVINE: In Carini?

LAFATA: In Carini. One room. No toilet facilities whatsoever.

LEVINE: Can you describe it? The room and how it was when they...

LAFATA: It was like one big room and then you had a kitchenette, right. afterwards. And then you had the attic. I can't say a lot of things that I would like to do.( he laughs ) If you want to...

LEVINE: Are you sure? Go ahead.

LAFATA: Well my mother used to make our own bread once a week. These round, big loaves of bread. And, naturally, the rats had a lot of fun. They would start from one side of the bread, right through like a tunnel ( he laughs ). So we cut the part where they went through and we eat the rest of the bread! Okay?! In other words, there was no lack of rats over there. You live with it, period. You live with it! Due to these sheep's barn next door to us, you couldn't do nothing. They live with you. And there was an old lady next door to us ( he laughs ), she used to catch these rats --big ones, these are house size --skin them and make stew out of it, and she used to call the kids in, few kids across the street, me included, so forth and so on. And we used to have a stew, rat stew. But they were clean rats.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) How'd it taste?

LAFATA: There was no, during the winter especially, we had a tripod with a burner and wood with a clay pot and that's what she used to make her stew in. Now I've been there five times. Every time, as I said before, every time I'm right near Palermo, whether I'm on a cruise or whether I'm on tour or whatever may be, I leave the crew for one day and I hop to my hometown. My cousin picks me up and I spend the day with him. Last September the 8th, we went there. My son treated me to go there --like my birthday, now --him and his wife. He wanted to meet these cousins of mine and he wanted to see the house I was born in and he wanted to see the town.

And we stayed there three days and then we, from then on we went to Termini. What we going to do there all ten days? There's nothing to do there outside of eating.

LEVINE: Can you remember, when you were little, the other kinds of food your mother made?

LAFATA: Well, yes. Meat was very scarce. Mostly we lived on macaroni and grains, and fish. Meat, they had a slaughterhouse but you can't buy their meat fresh because it's tough, and besides it was very dear. So, we lived on macaroni and vegetables. We grow vegetables, too. You got a piece of land, you grow vegetables. But where grow these vegetables about a few miles away from the house. You walk down to it. You don't ride. There was nothing. the only thing --transportation facility -- we had was a donkey. You have a donkey. You get on a donkey, we go there.

LEVINE: You mean your family had its own, your own donkey?

LAFATA: Yes, we had a donkey.

LEVINE: Did the donkey have a name?

LAFATA: ( he laughs ) No. ( laughs ) The other advantage is this, Janet, that we grow our own grain. Grain fields, you know. Now comes the harvest. We cut this grain and bring it to an area, an open area where you have to peel this thing, and the horses used to go right around it and get the shell of it, and bring the grain right to the, then we screen it and we take it home. The other advantage of it was, my father --may he rest in peace --due that we grow olives, he worked for someone where they squashed these olives. It was nothing but a circle, a platform about four feet high, and you got a big stone wheel with a wooden axle. And the horse goes right

around and he squashes olives. And the juice of these olives goes into a pit. Then they take it out; then buy cans, and they put it in bottles. It was amazing. That was the only facility we had in town. I mean, you pick these olives, now what do you do? So this one place, it was a bakery and a fountain in the back. It was this place where my father used to squash these olives with the horse and the axle. And the stone went about four feet ( he laughs ) high, the horse just got off; the wooden axle goes right around this platform, as we put these olives on this platform and the stone that goes around with the horse and squashes the olives. And it goes into a pit. And what I used to enjoy, there was a bakery in the front --the same owner --get a loaf of bread, came out of the oven, cut in half, bend down, soak it in oil, with peppers and that was lunch! ( he laughs ) That was our lunch!

LEVINE: Sounds delicious.

LAFATA: It's a, it was quite a, things that I remember, my father, he's, one of the jobs that he had. And packing lemons. And the night time he used to distributing water for this millionaire, cavalier. His title was "The Cavalier."

LEVINE: His title was that?

LAFATA: This person that my father distributed water. And through the influence of this "Cavalier," we came here because we couldn't wait for the quota. The quota was so far behind but through the influence of this "Cavalier," which had a powerful influence, he made it possible for us to come here sooner than our quota.

LEVINE: I see. Now, were you in school at all?

LAFATA: No school. I had no education, either there or neither here. There was no such a, there were schools already but we weren't qualified for school. ( he laughs ) Very few people went to school there, very few people.

LEVINE: So, your father came over a year before and what did he do when he got here?

LAFATA: Well, he was working for a real estate man. He owned a lot of real estate property. And my father was handyman, jack of all trades --a little carpentry, a little plastering, whatever these houses, whatever was required --my father was right there to do it. Like an empty apartment for this real estate man, he goes and patch the floor, little plastering, little bit of working, and things like that. And he was making, at that time, thirty-six dollars a week. And, and then people couldn't very well live on that. As a matter of fact, to help out, at that time before the first year or two after we came here, I used to help the milkman delivering bottles in back of the door. That time there was no supermarkets. The milkman would go up three or four flights and put some milk behind the door. And the cold them days was so severe that the cream used to pop out and the disk--the paper disk --used to pop out. And that was one, that was a couple of nights out of the week. The other couple of nights I used to help the bread man to deliver bread, and put each behind the door in these apartment houses, in Brooklyn, Red Hook Section we call it today. And it was Red Hook Section them days. ( he laughs )And in our spare time, ( he laughs ) we rig up a little wagon with four wheels --like the carriage, you know they throw the baby carriages away --a little wagon, go out in the afternoon and pick up newspapers, rags and stuff like that just to make a few pennies.

LEVINE: Where would you sell them?

LAFATA: To the junk shop, junky place, scrap, newspapers, rags.

LEVINE: Now, was your father able to save enough to bring the rest of the family over in that one year? I mean how did you come to, the whole family come to be here?

LAFATA: Well, he, that I can't answer because I was too little to understand how the financial end of it was translated through this person or maybe he paid him back afterwards. I can not really go into that because I wasn't old enough to understand the transaction, the financial transaction. But it wasn't too much them days, it was very little. But sixteen days...

LEVINE: Well, can you remember leaving? Can you remember leaving Carini?

LAFATA: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Did your mother take a lot of things? Do you remember packing?

LAFATA: No. No. Nothing. Nothing. Absolute. We had nothing and nothing -- We came with nothing. Nothing.

LEVINE: And how did you get to Palermo?

LAFATA: Okay, now, from Carini you take the ship, the excursion that goes from Palermo to Naples, which is an overnight run. Then Naples, you board the ship that comes to America and the name of the ship was " the America."

LEVINE: And how long did you have to stay in Naples before you got on the ship?

LAFATA: Same day.

LEVINE: Oh, same day.

LAFATA: As we left Palermo in the morning, we go there in the evening; we board the ship the same time. We did not stay in Naples at all, motel or nothing like that. There was no such things like that. As we got off one ship, we got on another ship. And, one experience that I can say is this, on the sixteen days was very rough seas. And them ships, them days, they weren't really built to, to have stabilized, nothing. Was a big sleeping quarters; maybe sleep two, three hundred people in that area, I don't know. And you had these bunks, three, one above the other. And, naturally, the sea being so rough, we throw up every, every hour almost. Nauseous. Vomiting. So the guy on top, he had ( he laughs ) the better end of it 'cause when he threw up the two guys underneath probably get part of it. And, during the day, naturally, you just wobbling around the rough sea. Dizzy and nauseous. It was a rough, rough going.

LEVINE: Can you remember the food? Did you get...?

LAFATA: Well the food was Italian food. Whatever they served, I can't remember what they served. Mostly spaghetti. No meat. I can't remember that very well because I was too young. And then from here we reached here, at Sandy Hook. Then the politics, so we go right to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

LAFATA: Sure. Definite.

LEVINE: What was that like?

LAFATA: Well, it was the same as it is today. As a matter of fact, I'll even go farther than that. About ten years ago --eight to ten years ago -we had a big job, a plumbing job at Ellis Island. We put about a thousand feet of water

pipng underneath the ground. We bid on that job and we got that job. The only way we got there --that transportation facility --we hired a barge with a tugboat to bring all of our equipments back home: laborers, piping material, manpower, and our food, X-amount of dollars, of course. And then at the end of the job, the same barge and the tugboat picked all our gear back home, and the laborers, shovels and whatever was involved. And, that's how we were able, we were able to do that job on this sort of transportation. 'Course the men used to go back and forth with the ferry, but in order to bring that gear we had to engage a barge with a tugboat.

LEVINE: How did you feel about doing your work at Ellis Island?

LAFATA: Well, ( he laughs ) it was --bring back memories. So that was the second time now this year that I went there aside from eight years ago when we did this job.

LEVINE: Well, you certainly circled back around. ( she laughs )

LAFATA: Quite an experience, yes.

LEVINE: Can you remember your first impression when you saw Ellis Island when you were a child?

LAFATA: Well, I don't --too much because I thought it was a standard procedure that you have to stop there. I do remember --it was because of medical conditions --we had to be examined for any foreign disease. That I knew, that much of it 'cause that's the reason we stopped there.

LEVINE: Were you afraid. I mean were, people afraid they'd be sent back?

LAFATA: Well, there was a fear there because we met a lot people that they were rejected for some kind of disease, and we were worried about it. You know, if they find anything wrong with us, go back, it'd be a disaster. And, fortunately, we went through. And now, when I was there this June, July, I saw my name on the sea wall. In fact, I have a picture of my name. My friend, he's upstairs on the sixth floor, he came from Philadelphia, and we met in Staten Island, and that's how we, we both had this thing set up anyway, before we went back North --that we were going to go Staten Island, eh, Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island. And, he had a beautiful camera. He took that picture. That name came out very clear. And, the only thing I was disappointed --on the computer in Ellis Island, it says "Frank Lafata came 1922 from Palermo." And it gives you the section number where your name's going to be. Now, on the sea wall it says "Lafata Family," because my son, on this application, this form that he filled out he specified " Frank Lafata," not " Lafata Family." Now, I don't know if there's any way to correct that, I don't think it's --just forget about it, so. But the form that he filled out, which we made a donation there, "Frank Lafata," which the computer shows "Frank Lafata," not "Lafata Family."

LEVINE: Well, if you'd like, I can find out who you might contact; I'm not sure if it can be changed, but...

LAFATA: Unless, unless, see the section that they gave us on the far end, on the right, far end, was 16-62; and the section was "Lafata Family" was a different section altogether! Unless, it might be, but I went there, no, 14-62, something like that, the numbers didn't reach that high. I guess hadn't, had not put the rest of the copper there yet.

LEVINE: Well, maybe I can check that out for you when I get back.

LAFATA: Fine, now, if it's, if it's an error, or maybe, it's supposed to be completed 196 --, '92

LEVINE: Yes.

LAFATA: Okay. So, maybe the section with "Lafata Family" is not the section, number section that's on the computer. The computer says 14-62, section 14-62; that was not, that was 12 something.

LEVINE: Okay, let me check that for you.

LAFATA: In fact, I don't know, my friend, this guy, he says, "Hey, there it is over here. How come?" The computer says 14-62, and here it says only 12 something. That's a big span between; so if there's, if it's an error, it'd be nice to correct it.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. Let's go back to Carini. When you, before you left, what did you know about the United States? Did you...?

LAFATA: Nothing.

LEVINE: Know things from your father? Relatives? People who had been...

LAFATA: Nothing at all. Absolutely. ( Spoken at same time as interviewer above. ) Nothing at all. Not a thing.

LEVINE: Do you remember at all what you expected when, when you were leaving?

LAFATA: We didn't know where, where we were going to go. What, what sort of country this was going to be. But, we knew that this was a freedom. We

were looking for freedom. And, there in Italy, you have to, you know with five boys and three girls, my mother was afraid that we may have to go into the army --it's mandatory. You reach the age of eighteen, you go to, you go to the army there. So, there was one of the things that my mother feared. So, we should go to the army, in Italy.

LEVINE: What was the army, how long did you have to stay in the army at that time?

LAFATA: I don't know. I know my father was there during the war, but he got out in one piece. Of course, he was, he was discharged, we had disability discharge. And, but we knew that this was a country of freedom. We were looking for freedom. And that we knew. That nobody would, the army wouldn't involve you. You're not forced to go to the army, something like that. And that's about all we knew. But as far as...

LEVINE: Were there other ways that you felt that you weren't free in Italy at that time?

LAFATA: No, no. I can't say because we were too little to understand that. We were too little to understand that.

LEVINE: Can you remember at all what your mother told you about the United States?

LAFATA: Well, my mother didn't know, knew less. I want to say this, Janet. My father came here one year before with that intention. But all the people, friends, pisano, tell you, "You crazy, you bringing a family here. You're going to starve to death. How you going support

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LAFATA: That is, Janet, men, they used to come to the United States and send all the money to the families. And so, my father, naturally, he thought this was the country of opportunity. But he didn't want to be alone here and send money back there because, again, we go back again, we'll all be in the army, five boys and three girls --five boys and two girls, one was born here, last one, last girl; so that we were eight --so he made up his mind that he's going to get the family over there. And he did, but they thought he was crazy. "Hey, you going to ruin yourself. You can't support a family here with seven kids and all." They thought he was out of his mind. Very few people did that. It was ninety-five per cent of the men them days, until not too long ago, they came here for a period of years --two, three years, four years --they go back, come back again. Make money here and they got their social security, and they live over there. If they're, some are still alive, they retire on their social security. Not only back to Italy but, I guess, to all the countries. And I can't think of anything else other than that.

LEVINE: Well, let's see, when you got off the ship and you met your father, where did you go first?

LAFATA: I did not meet my father. My father, again, he came with the tugboat. Not allowed to get on, on Ellis Island. But he jumped the tugboat ( he laughs ) just to kiss us all and greet us all, and right away he was back to the tugboat. He did that for three days. Jumped the, leaved the tugboat because I guess the tide was just high enough to jump the wall, and then when we...

LEVINE: Then where did you go?

LAFATA: Well we went to, as I say, we had no rooms. My father was not able to find rooms all the while that he was there. And then, what good is finding rooms prior, before we come here. He would have to pay rent for nothing. So he figure, "Well, let them come here." Some of the relatives will take us in for a month or so 'til he was able to find rooms, and that's where he had trouble, finding rooms.

LEVINE: Now did you, were the rooms that you had with relatives, ere they in Brooklyn or they were in...?

LAFATA: Brooklyn. Red Hook section. I'm going to mention the street --Barn Street and Union --Brooklyn. That's the Red Hook section, they call it.

LEVINE: And was that mostly Italian immigrants at that time?

LAFATA: Yes. Mostly. And, cold water flats. No heat. And that's about it.

LEVINE: Now, did any of your brothers and sisters go to school when they got here, the younger ones?

LAFATA: The younger ones did short period of time. But I didn't. I was put to work right away.

LEVINE: And how did you find learning English once you got here?

LAFATA: Well, that's a good question. As I got into the plumbing industry, I made up my mind that I'm gonna be somebody.

LEVINE: Do you know where you got that idea from, that you wanted to be somebody?

LAFATA: Yes, I know. When I started in the plumbing business, as a helper, the mechanics that I worked with they thought that I was garbage under their feet --daigo, guinea, bastard, wop, "get this thing," "get that thing" --and I couldn't take this anymore at all. I promised myself --I loved the industry, that's why I didn't want to quit --I promised myself that if I lived to be an old man, I'm going to have my own business. So now, the first thing, I started to go to school for my license. I failed ten times but I kept going back, 'cause once a year they got to give that test. It's a state law, they give that test once a year. So I go back to Delahan --Delahan is a school that prepares candidates for police, firemen, building inspector, plumbing inspector, so forth and so on, all the trades --and I go back again the following year but it was, fortunately, you only pay half the second time if you fail. ( both laugh ) So, I kept the other half, for ten years I fail, because, tell you the truth, that test, them days, qualifies you for--same as engineer, architect or so forth --the mathematic questions was beyond my knowledge without schooling. So I had to study, restudy, study so forth so on. No problem with the practical work. I knew the practical from A to Z. I used to read the code. Day and night. I used to go to bed with the plumbing code. But the theoretical, the mathematic questions, they were beyond my capacity. That's why I kept on failing. Finally I made it, became a licensed plumber 1953, September 'cause you have to take the theory first and the practical afterwards, six months later. You fail the theory, you don't take the practical, which is lead wiping, reading plans, so forth. And, so the practical came, took the test in January. January every year comes out the theory, and the practical, she usually comes out around June, July, something like that. Now another incident, a jobbing shop that I started jobbing, doing jobbing alteration. At the time we had, a ( he laughs ) plumber had a weather bag, a strap, and you carry everything but the kitchen sink. We had no trucks. You take the subway, the elevator or the trolley car --has no buses, them days --so you get into

the subway to go up town with my mechanic, special rush hour in the morning, you know you got greasy overalls and people move away from you --anyway, this is very interesting. We're going down Seventh Avenue, 40th Street, to get the subway to go uptown, on a job, a mechanic and I. We're walking from Ninth Avenue and 38th Street to 40th Street and Seventh Avenue to get the subway. I says to my mechanic, "Willy" --Willy Lefkowitz, I'll never forget his name --I said, "Willy, my shoulder hurts me bad." He says, "Carry that bag, you guinea bastard." Now whether he meant it or not, I threw that bag down at the beginning of the platform as you go down the stairs to the subway train and it rolled all the way down, strap broke, all the tools scattered all over the platform, down to the next landing. That's how mad I was and I quit the job. I quit and I went to work on high riser, for more experience. So, over the years, I took plumbing inspector courses, master plumber license courses, air condition courses, house inspector, air condit --I took every course pertaining to the building line, and that's how I was able to get my knowledge, how to write and read. The other experience that I gained was working twenty-five years for --'cause in 1940 I started working for the government, 1940, April -- New York Navel Shipyard in Brooklyn. I declined that job three times because, I had application but I declined it because I was foreman for shop. Anyway, the other experience that I gained was worthwhile. I did a lot of repair ships work. They used to do in the war. Ships come in from over seas, you know, every fifteen days, red hot and, and some of the ships, bigger ships, the cruisers and battle ships, they used to come in for sixty days, thirty days, sixty days. Now, I'm a supervisor, now, and you're sitting in the ward room with all the officers, construction officers, all the trades on this long table, and you got to give them the per percentages of your jobs each and every week at a meeting. And if you say, "Well, lack of manpower," there's such a thing because they can give you all the manpower they want. They can get them out of Newark to favor their commission ships, 'cause these ships gotta go out. Newark can work.

But don't say you got forty percent when you only got twenty percent because they put you down. They hold you to that. Fuel oil system, transfer condenser you want, those jobs you got get in percentages, each and every week to these construction officers. And they go 'round the table: ship wrights, machinists, electrical, and so forth and all the trades. And you got the progress men there. "Well that material's not available, you can't go ahead with that job." The construction officer turns around to the progress Man and says "What about that?" He marks it down, he's gonna follow it up; Why this material is not available? And that went on and went on there from week to week, these jobs, and that's how I picked up my knowledge. Of course, you've got to think hard before you say something. Make sure you say the correct thing. And that's how I got, I learned the hard way. Between twenty-five years in the navel shipyard and plumbing industry on the outside, I had enough experience here that I can, I can say, "Well, even though I didn't go to school --" I forgot a lot of our course right now, but it was very, very, very very experience when you send these planes off the flight deck. We shoot them off with a hun -- we shoot them of with not, eleven hundred pounds of steam, super-heater steam and I had one of those guys there, I run a six inch line from the boiler room right to the flight deck. Eleven hundred super-heater steam is just, just like gas. It goes through steam cylinders. They just push --the flight deck officer gives signals to send that plane off. The sailor just push that button and that plane goes shwhissh. When he leaves the deck, the flight deck, he's already going a hundred seventy-five miles an hour. Then he's on his own. Another experience is when they land, when they come back from the rear end. We got cables, resting gear, we call it --arresting gearing. We got about six, seven cables right across from side to side. They land, they got a hook. They grab that cable, that cables stretches about seventy-five hundred feet. If they miss one, they catch the other one. Very interesting. We go out for sea for a week after we finish where we built these ships. Trial run, a week, maneuvers to see if anything goes

wrong. Supervision goes out. I take a couple of men, a couple of my best men to see if something goes wrong. So we can tackle right away. But something did go wrong one night. An air line, a quarter inch air line to the radar, up in the mast, top of the mast, sprung a leak. I send my men up there to braise it. Cold night, windy, middle of night, middle of Virginia, North Carolina. They notify all the mercenary ships to stay away from it because they do some turns, the maneuvers. It's, it's experience. I'm not...

LEVINE: Well you certainly enjoyed your career.

LAFATA: I enjoy my career.

LEVINE: How about your love life? When did you meet your wife?

LAFATA: Well ( pause ) I had several girls prior to my wife but things didn't work out. And this is again very interesting how I met my wife. It was 1936, March 15th. I don't forget dates. I may be old but I got a good memory. I had it before, now, but it's upstairs, so over here. A cousin of my wife, Barbara, "Hey scrinpot, don't make any plans for March 15, 1936 because there's a fifty wedding anniversary for my cousins in New York." It was Thirtieth Street, fourth floor, I'm the only stranger! This fifty wedding anniversary was all cousins and relatives and so on. So, you go there, and my cousin did say "There are two or three girls that, I'm sure you'll like 'em." Two of 'em, my wife and my wife's sister; that's the whole family. Another one was another cousin. But I picked out my wife. She was hesitating a bit, but the uncles, they said "Go out with him, he's a plumber, He makes good money." I was making forty-five dollars a week in Depression days, when lawyers were riving elevators for twenty dollars a week. Anyway, we got together and...

LEVINE: Did you have a long courtship? Did you court her for very long?

LAFATA: Well, she hesitated because she had another boyfriend, also a plumber. My wife used to be a part time bookkeeper in a little store just down the corner from where she lived, where I met my wife in Bensonhurst.

LEVINE: Now, had she come to this country or her parents?

LAFATA: No, she was born here. She was part time bookkeeper after school. And this little plumber shop, a south store, which I would have rented years later ( he laughs ). And she became my book keep. Anyway, she had this fellow Skippy that she was going out with. Then I came around and I'm also a plumber, so she dropped Skippy for me, and we got married 1937. Now after I got my license in 1953 I opened up a little shop right there in the same store where my wife was a part time keeper, bookkeeper for this plumbing outfit. How history repeats itself. So then I, we went to larger quarters, naturally, ten blocks away, so forth so on. It's what makes history.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was your wife's maiden name? What's her full name?

LAFATA: Plaia. P-L-A-I-A. P-L-A-I-A.

LEVINE: And what's her first name?

LAFATA: Agatha. You want me to go upstairs...?

LEVINE: Agatha Plaia. Do you have children? You and Agatha?

LAFATA: I got two boys and a girl.

LEVINE: Now what are their names?

LAFATA: My oldest boy's Salvatore, then comes Josephine. My mother, her name was Josephine. See, we use the parents' name, first child. Not today anymore; today they use, they just pick their own name. But father was Salvatore and my son's Salvator. My mother was Josephine and my daughter, Josephine. My second boy, he took my father-in-law's name, Paul. And, Paul, he's he works in a bank. He's Senior Vice President of the bank. Salvatore's with me in the business. He just bought a house on the West Coast.

LEVINE: Well, tell me this; is there anything that you could say that kind of sums up your life, starting out in Carini and now here in Hallandale, Florida that...?

LAFATA: Well, I've been back now for three or four months. My daughter when she built the house, 1980, she made an extension --Mother and Daughter --I got three rooms there, which two doors they go into my daughter. So we sold our house in Bensonhurst. That house was willed to my wife. We sold that house in 1980 and my daughter had built this, she want, she said "What do you need a house for? Most of the time you stay in Florida anyway." And we built this condo, 1975. And, she enjoys it here, pretty much. And that's about all I can say as far as my life career is concerned between Italy, Carini, Palermo. Palermo, remember prior to me coming here, because my father's sister --she was a buyer, buy merchandise, goods to make dresses, you know --in Palermo, bring it to the hometown and sell it to individual women. And she used to take me there, everytime, every few weeks when she used to get, two weeks, a month, she used to take me with her.

LEVINE: So you had a little bit of an idea beyond.

LAFATA: I had a little bit of Palermo, yes. I knew Palermo before we left for Italy. I had a little, I had a vague idea from Palermo. And I think that's about all. I can't think of anything else.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure speaking with you.

LAFATA: My pleasure. If you want to meet my wife, I'll be only too glad to go upstairs. It's all messed up.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I've been speaking with Frank Lafata here in Florida.

END OF INTERVIEW